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Poor-House Pete, the Postal-Clerk Detective

BY EDWARD LYTTON.



PETE HAD REGAINED HIS FEET, AND STOOD FACING HIS ENEMIES, HIS EYES FLASHING DEFIANCE.

Poor-House Pete,

The Postal-Clerk Detective;

OR,

THE PRECIOUS PATRIMONY.

BY EDWARD LYTTON.

CHAPTER I.

THE POOR-HOUSE WAIF.

"He's a peart-lookin' lad, strong an' active, an' I reckon like enough we can't do better'n take him, Samantha!"

And Farmer Joshua Fisher readjusted his spectacles and surveyed the subject of his opinion, with his pinched, weather-beaten face drawn into a severely critical expression.

And Mrs. Samantha Fisher poked a pinch of snuff up one of her nostrils, and drew her new shawl closer about her spare figure, in a way calculated to express a shrug of disgust.

"I am sure it's none of my business, Joshua Fisher," she replied, in a tone sharp and rasping.

"Ef ye want to adopt a beggar from the county house, an' fetch him up to sass and abuse you, you can do it—I don't! And what's more—if you bring the boy around my house, he's got to mind me, or I'll clear him out in quick order."

"To be sure you will—most certainly you will, Samantha!" and Fisher took it upon himself to shrug his shoulders.

"Every one knows, for miles around, that you wear the breeches, or else there's thunderation to pay. The boy will have to mind, of course, or Doctor Birch will attend to his jacket. I fancy I hain't forgot how to flog a lad yet, if it have bin two-score o' years since I used ter teach the young idea how tew shoot!"

"If you desire to adopt a boy, sir, I am confident Master Perkins will be just the lad for you," said the alms-house superintendent. "Since he was left in our charge, destitute and friendless, he has been a very good sort of lad, and I predict the making of a smart young man of him."

The above conversation occurred in the private office of the Superintendent of the B— County Poor-house, one pleasant August afternoon.

The corpulent superintendent had been awakened from a pleasant *siesta* by the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Joshua Fisher, well-to-do old-country people, of the somewhat ancient class, who had called with a view of adopting from the poor-house some bright and active lad who could do chores at the farm and take that burden from their shoulders.

The B— County Alms-house had several boys in charge whom it was in their power to bind out to desirable parties, and Master Peter Perkins being one of the brightest, he had been brought from the workshop of the institution to be inspected by Mr. and Mrs. Fisher.

Perkins could hardly be termed a boy in regard to size.

For although not yet seventeen years of age, he had attained a man's average height, and was broad-shouldered, stout-limbed and rugged and strong.

His face was rather a handsome one, particularly denoting that he owned an easy, good-natured spirit, while his mouth habitually wore a wagging expression and his discerning brown eyes a look of shrewdness.

He had already been some six months in the institution, at the time of the Fishers' visit, and his mother having died there, he had had no particular idea of leaving the place until he had finished learning his trade at painting, providing he was allowed to remain.

He knew the rules of the institution, however, and understood what to expect when ordered into the presence of Mr. Black, the superintendent, and his two visitors.

He knew that his mother had, before her death, given the institution full control over him during his minority, and that Mr. Black had the power to bind him out to whomsoever he might please.

And now that he had been presented to the Fishers, he instantly took a positive dislike to them, and foresaw that if he was indentured to them, it would be anything but a pleasant life he would lead.

Quick to form impressions, and yet ever wonderfully correct in making estimates of people, he knew the Fishers would be hard taskmasters.

"Master Perkins," Mr. Black said, "these good people, whom I know by reputation to be the most respectable, kind and charitable folks,

have come here to-day for the purpose of adopting from this institution one of you unfortunate boys, who have been dependent upon the county for your support. Mr. and Mrs. Fisher, while well-to-do in this world's goods, have no offspring of their own, and as years have advanced a longing for a son has come over them—a desire to take to their hearts some youthful spirit, who would be alike their child, assistant and comfort as they go down the path of life. How would you like to be apprenticed to them? Of course, you know, that is merely a term for being adopted as their son. They offer you a home, and eventually, if you are kind and loving to them, you will be rewarded."

"Yas, that's a fact," Joshua Fisher declared. "If you come to live with us, and are a thrifty, industrious boy, and do what you are told to, we sha'n't—at least I sha'n't—forget you in my will."

"Don't you go to makin' promises ahead, Josh Fisher," Samantha warned, sharply. "You know well enough I'll outlive you, and I'd like to know who is going to be boss then—me, or some one else?"

"Oh! you—you, of course," Joshua hastened to declare. "You always hev worn the breeches, an' I s'pose you always will!"

"I presume I have as much right to as you!" was the retort.

"Well, you can settle the matter of attire at another time," Superintendent Black interposed, a little impatiently. "And zow, Master Perkins, what have you to say?"

"I don't suppose I have any say in the matter, have I?" Pete replied. "If so, Mr. Black, I should rather stay here at the house until I have a better knowledge of the painter's trade."

"Most likely, sir, but you are getting to be a good-sized, able-bodied lad, and the county cannot undertake to keep in idleness those who are able to work. You are much older than the average run of boys who are bound out from here, and as long as we have an opportunity to secure you a good home, and a prospective bright future, it is our duty to exercise our superior judgment and do so."

"Very likely you're partly right," Pete replied: "but, sir, I would prefer not to be bound out to do any one's drudgery. If I am old enough to work, as you say—and I have no doubt but what I am—I am old enough, and strong enough to go out upon the world and earn my own living!"

"Now there, will you listen, Joshua Fisher? D'ye hear him? Because he is able to do a chore he thinks he ought to be his own boss! My! what conceit and obstinate brats there are in this world!"

"Oh! shut up," Fisher retorted. "How d'ye s'pose the child will like ye, ef ye pitch at him like a mad bull? You hain't no sense. Let the boy alone till he *does* bad afore ye try to lam-baste him."

Then, turning to Pete, he added:

"That's all right, boy; you come to Fisher Farm to live, and you'll get better to eat an' wear than ye do here, hev a chance to go to school, an' everything will be O. K. O' course Samantha gits the tantrums once in a while, but that's nateral wi' most women, I reckon."

"If I'm bound out to you I'll have to stay till I am twenty-one, will I?"

"Sart'in. The first two years ye won't be wuth yer board an' clothes, say nothin' 'bout yer schoolin', an' after that it will keep me 'hustlin' to get the vally o' your keepin' out o' ye an' save a penny fer myself."

"Do you live on a farm?" Pete asked.

"Yas—the best farm in B— county, ef I do say it."

"Where is your farm situated?"

"Jest a mile an' a half from W—. Ef you're right smart and quick, you can go to taown for the mail sometimes."

Pete laughed.

"The inducement is certainly enticing," he said, dryly. "It happens, sir, that I have been in many more attractive towns and cities than W—, before misfortune attacked mother and myself. If I am bound out to you, sir, I wish you to always bear in mind that my mother was a lady, my father a gentleman, and that, although I am at present an inmate of a poor-house, my education has not been altogether neglected—that my principles are honorable, my pride just, and my spirit unconquerable, except by kindness. Only one condition of affairs could ever cause me to consent to be bound out, as a literal slave, to another man, to do his work for the simple remuneration of victuals and clothing. That condition is, that it was my mother's desire that I should be bound out until I was of age, she probably believing that such imprison-

ment would keep me away from bad society. Consequently, sir, I cannot refuse to be indentured to you, owing to my loving remembrance of my angel mother. If bound out to you, I will do your bidding, sir, but only in such manner as I believe to be right and just. But I *will* not be tyrannized over, by you nor any other person, as long as I have a particle of spirit or strength in my body. That is all!"

Standing proudly erect, and looking as handsome as a young Hercules, even though his clothing was of but the commonest kind, young Perkins uttered the speech with a spirit which spoke plainly enough that he meant exactly what he said.

And while Superintendent Black was secretly elated at Pete's spirit, the Fishers looked as if dumfounded at the boy's audacity.

"See! see!" snapped Mrs. Fisher—"you see, don't you, Joshua Fisher, how it will go? You won't have the boy a day before he will want to run the entire establishment. The idea! A pauper wantin' to put on the airs of a gentleman! It's ridiculous—outrageous!"

"Will you dry up?" growled Fisher. "I'll have no trouble getting along with him, if you'll only keep your blamed tongue still. Mr. Superintendent, fix out the papers, and we'll get back home before it's milking time!"

"Are you ready to go, Master Perkins?" Black demanded.

"Supposing I refuse to go at all?" Pete demanded.

"That's out of the question!" was the stern reply. "If I indenture you to Mr. Fisher, the papers will warrant him in forcing you to go, providing you are obstinate, and the law will uphold him in punishing you, as an incorrigible, in case you do not implicitly obey him in everything, the same as if you were his own son."

"It will, eh?" and the spirited gleam returned to the youth's eyes. "Well, I supposed slavery days were over, Mr. Black, but it would seem not from your tell. If you propose to bind me out, go ahead and fix out the papers, and I will accompany these people to their home, and remain there as long as I am treated kindly. When they try to play the tyrant over Pete Perkins, they will need to hunt up some other poor lad, who is not possessed of an independent spirit."

"Oh! I'll crush yer independent spirit when I get ye to the farm!" Joshua Fisher thought, while his vinegar-visaged spouse pressed her thin lips together in spiteful silence, as Superintendent Black's pen scratched over several pages of legal cap, which were to make Peter Perkins the "bound boy" of Joshua Fisher, farmer, of the town of W—.

And the papers were duly signed, and in an hour afterward Poor-house Pete was *en route* for Fisher Farm and about to enter into a new phase of existence, which was destined to guide him into many a novel and exciting adventure and situation.

CHAPTER II.

"FIRST BLOOD."

WHEN the Fishers and their new bound boy left the town, which was the county seat of B— county, the day was well advanced, and as W— was some eight miles distant, there was a fair prospect that it would be dark ere the destination was reached, taking into consideration that the sky was overcast with clouds, that foretold the coming of a rain-storm, and another drawback in the shape of Fisher's horses' inability to get off of a very slow species of dog-trot.

Indeed, their scrawny appearance was sufficient cause for their slow motion, coupled with the fact that they were attached to a heavy lumber wagon which might have constituted one of the Fishers' first pieces of matrimonial personal property.

The old man and woman occupied the high spring seat at the fore of the wagon, while Pete was left to help himself to a seat upon a sparse array of straw on the bottom of the wagon-box in their rear.

On leaving B— behind, the Fishers entered into what was evidently a spirited conversation, but it was nevertheless conducted in such an undertone as to be inaudible to Pete had he been inclined to listen, which he was not, for his mind was busied in wondering what the future had in store for him—wondering if, after all, it would not be a benefit to get away from the poor-house.

He was already well enough satisfied that he would have anything but a pleasant time with the Fisher family; but then he had made up his mind that if he could not get along agreeably in

this new home he would leave it, no matter if he was "bound out,"—given away like a piece of property.

It was his intention, however, to remain with the Fishers, even if he had to bear numerous little insults, for he wanted to be near W— for awhile at least.

His desire to do so was the mystery concerning himself.

He and his mother had traveled from place to place ever since he could remember, until finally she was taken sick at B—, and her money being exhausted, some charitable people had provided her and the boy a place in the poor-house.

Here, of quick consumption, she had died, and upon her death-bed she had attempted to tell her son why she had traveled so long and far, but death came too quickly, and all that Pete could understand was that if she had not been taken sick until she reached W—, she would have been at the end of her journey.

She had often spoken to Pete of his father in loving terms, but he could not remember of ever having seen him, or of her mentioning positively whether he was living or dead.

After his mother's death, however, he had had many a thought about the matter, and had come to the conclusion that there was something for him to learn in regard to himself, and the place for him to learn it was at W—.

Hence he had more readily assented to being bound out to the Fishers, than he would have done but for the facts just mentioned.

The route from B— to the Fisher homestead was through one of the richest farming sections of the State. On either side the road was bordered by handsome fences, and numerous costly residences; the crops showed great care in cultivation, and weeds evidently were not in favor.

The road had been turnpiked and graveled at large expense; in fact, on every hand was evidence that the residents of B— county were people of thrift and means.

Although not particularly in love with the conveyance, Pete rather enjoyed the ride, and wondered, as the scrawny team jogged along, if he would ever be able to own a residence as desirable as those they were passing every few minutes.

The prospects of immediate riches were not extraordinary, when he came to consider that he was bound out for over four years.

It was nearly dark when the town of W— was reached—for the Fishers were obliged to pass through the village in order to reach their farm.

The horses were by this time pretty well fagged out, and could not be got off a walk, despite all the farmer's chirping and pulling on the lines.

After a half-hour's toiling along a bustling main street, the lumber wagon drew up in front of a pretentious brick building over whose door swung a gilt-lettered sign announcing that it was the "Post Office."

"Whoa!" Joshua Fisher sung out, at the same time pulling back on the lines, vigorously enough to have stopped a team of elephants, and evidently blind to the fact that the poor brutes he drove were only too willing to take a rest. "Git you out there, Peter, an' go ax the post-master if my *Tribune* has come. I'll be danged if it ain't on time this week, I'll make 'em send my money back. Come! Don't set there gaup-in' like a monkey!—git out, an' do as I tell ye!"

Without a word Pete leaped nimbly from the wagon, while his spirit rebelled at the language of the farmer.

W— was a "fly" town. To use a slang phrase, poor people had "no show" there, as almost everybody was well-to-do. It was adjacent to a thriving city and was populated by "the aristocracy;" it had a magnificent seminary for boys and girls, a few stores, a large number of magnificent homes, and counted itself one of the *élite* towns of that particular section of the State.

Every like town has its young bloods, and W— was well supplied with this particular commodity.

There were some eight or ten of these well-dressed young "gentlemen," lounging about the entrance to the post-office, as Pete got out of the wagon. He was conscious that as many critical pairs of eyes, were turned upon him, and also at once perceived that old Fisher's journey to the poor-house had become known to them, for one of the fellows, as Peter advanced, called out:

"Look, boys!—old Fisher has fished in the poor-house and caught a tramp!"

"My! Ain't he a daisy?"

"A regular lah-de-dah!"

"From the poor-house?"

"Yes. A pauper!"

"He won't last long around these parts."

Young Perkins heard, but quietly mounted the steps and entered the post-office, although the insults sent the blood tingling through his veins.

Within doors he encountered another party of youths, of about his own age, but they were kind enough to give him only a supercilious glance, and give each other a nudge, as much as to say:

"Tell me what it is, and you can have it!" as they passed from the office.

To his surprise, on presenting himself at the general-delivery window, Pete found it attended by a very pretty girl of about his own age—a well-dressed, intelligent miss, with the prettiest pair of eyes, and the sweetest-expressed mouth, it had ever been his good fortune to behold.

Those wondrous orbs, indeed, seemed to inventory Pete at a glance, and he felt that he would much rather have faced a cannon than their scrutiny.

"Ahem! is there any mail for Mr. Joshua Fisher?" he managed to articulate, afterward wondering how he contrived to do it, for he felt the blood mounting to his temples.

"I believe there is a paper, sir. Yes, here it is—the *Tribune*. That is the only postal matter the Fishers ever get," and the pretty post-mistress smiled. "Excuse me, but are you the young gentleman who is to live with the Fishers?"

"I am the pauper they have adopted from the poor-house," Pete replied, candidly, as he put the paper in his pocket. "Why?" and he gazed at her so keenly that a flush of embarrassment swept over her face.

"Oh, nothing particularly; I saw you get out of the wagon, and had heard that it was their intention to adopt another boy," she replied.

"Another?" Pete echoed.

"Oh yes. Were you not aware that they had another boy? They did have, however—but do not let me detain you. The Fishers are very disagreeable people, and will scold you like everything if you delay a minute. I don't envy you your position."

"I don't believe I shall fall in love with it," Pete replied, with a faint smile. "But they may find that I have somewhat of a will of my own. Do you know the Fishers, personally?"

The girl glanced about her quickly, evidently to see if she would be overheard, then pressed her face closer to the window-grating.

"I could tell you lots about them," she answered, hastily. "My father's farm adjoins theirs, you know. Wait! I have it. You will be forced to go to bed at nine o'clock. Every one at the Fisher place retires at that time. When you are satisfied all are asleep, climb out of the trap onto the roof, and drop to the ground. Then come to the bridge that spans the creek, and I will tell you much that will be necessary for you to know. Good-by!"

And with this parting, Pete's first acquaintance in W— vanished from view.

"By George! there's some consolation that I've heard one friendly word uttered!" he mused, as he turned and left the post-office. "I wonder who she is, and what she wants to tell me!"

As he left the office, he paid no attention to the "bloods" who had jeered at him when he entered.

It would have been better for him had he looked sharply about him, however, for he had not taken half a dozen steps toward the street, when he tripped against a rope that had been stretched across the veranda, and fell sprawling upon the hard asphaltum sidewalk.

In falling his nose struck heavily, and the blood spurted from it in a stream.

He was upon his feet in an instant, and perceived that two of these young fellows had been the cause of his downfall, they having held the rope that he tripped over.

"Hurrah! first blood, and the pauper down!" one of the twain cried, while the others clapped their hands and laughed boisterously.

"You cowardly curs! I'll show you to whom the first blood belongs!" Pete cried, dashing the blood from his face. "If I am a pauper I'll show you you can't insult me, you ill-bred loafers!" and making a bound forward, he struck one of the "bloods" full in the face, knocking him down, and then with a savage ejaculation, turned upon the others, aiming telling blows right and left with the precision of a veteran pugilist.

CHAPTER III.

THE INITIATION.

Blow after blow he struck, right and left, and by the time two of the sons of aristocracy lay

stretched upon the sidewalk and others had received discolored eyes and bloody noses, the effete gang were so terrorized that they fled from the veranda in hot haste, and when he stood alone a laugh rung from Pete's lips.

"When you want another dose of pauperism, you miserable dudes, give me a call!" he cried; then, turning, he clambered into the wagon.

The Fishers had watched the proceedings in grim silence, their hard, vinegary visages never once indicating that they were particularly concerned whether Pete got the worst of it or not.

The moment Pete took his seat in the bottom of the wagon the old man "licked" up the horses, and the vehicle rolled away out of town.

Nor after the village was left behind did Fisher or his wife pay any attention to their bound boy, but kept up a conversation between themselves, in an undertone, the subject of which Pete believed was in reference to himself.

"I wonder if this is a calm that precedes the storm?" Pete mused. "They're not keepin' mum without some reason, an' it strikes me they are holding back in anticipation of giving me an initiatory whaling when they get home."

But, whatever punishment might be in store for him, Pete could not help but feel consolation at one thing: he had vanquished the nobby gang at the village, and the pretty young deputy post-mistress had, without doubt, witnessed the whole affair. If she was the kind of a girl he had taken her to be, his prowess would raise him several degrees in her estimation, a consideration that his youthful pride coveted.

It was pretty near dusk when the wagon reached the Fisher farm-house.

Unlike the many other elegant rural residences, the home of the Fishers was one of those old-time, many-gabled stone houses, some of which, yet standing, date back to Colonial days. It was a three-and-a-half-story edifice, covering a considerable area, plastered on the exterior, and largely overgrown with vines from the ground to its huge chimneys, the vine-work finding homes for thousands of sparrows.

All in all, it was a grim, gaunt and weird-looking abode, surrounded by a grove of towering spruce trees, and the whole inclosed by a high, tight board fence painted white.

Just back of the Fisher farm-house was a lake of no insignificant size, bordered on three sides by magnificent farming land, and on the fourth by a densely-timbered and forbidding-looking cedar swamp.

The outlet of the lake was a small creek which crossed the highway not far from the farm-house. Its source, as far as any one knew, was from springs in the swamp—for few people were there who cared to penetrate to the inner recesses of the swamp, which covered thousands of acres, and was said to be a treacherous place for human feet to tread.

A considerable bluff arose from the rear of the house, and ended abruptly at the lake, the water's edge at the front of it being thicketed with tag-elders and rushes, some of which grew a considerable distance out into the lake.

Besides the farm-house itself, all of the out-buildings of the premises, and garden and orchard, were included within the inclosure, so that once within this inclosure a person was literally shut out from the world. It would have been a hard matter for any one to get into the farm-yard without prying off one of the boards, for the top of the fence was ornamented with sharp spikes driven closely together, and the ponderous gates were kept constantly locked.

At night, too, a savage bull-dog was turned loose within the grounds, and as a natural consequence, tramps who knew anything about Fisher Farm gave it a wide berth, and those who "worked the racket" once never attempted it again.

As Joshua Fisher drew rein before the great double gates, he turned gruffly to Poor-house Pete.

"Come, you lazy-bones, git out an' pull the bell-knob what ye'll find nigh the latch!" he growled; "and don't let it take ye all night, or I'll cowhide you within an inch o' yer life!"

"Before you go to threatening, you had better give time to telling what you want done," Pete returned, promptly, as he sprang from the wagon and rung the bell.

"Hear him, will ye?" snarled Mrs. Fisher, beating her foot upon the dashboard of the wagon. "Oh, but I tell ye, Josh Fisher, it's a sorry day when you bring that young whelp here!"

"You shet up yer mouth!" Fisher retorted. "Are you runnin' the boy, or am I, I'd like to know?"

"Oh, you are—of course you are!" was the savage response.

"Then I'll 'tend to his case—not you!" Fisher declared.

The bell was soon answered; the gates were unlocked and swung inward by a burly, red-whiskered farm-hand, whose huge fists looked as if he might be able to fell a bullock at a single blow.

As soon as the gates were opened, Fisher drove within the inclosure, Pete following the wagon, and assisting to close one of the gates.

He also assisted to put away the team and fodder the stock, the red-whiskered individual, whose name proved to be Hank Honeybee, ordering him about in surly tones, and interpolating his directions frequently with broad oaths.

Pete uttered no word of remonstrance, however, but performed the tasks assigned him in the best manner he knew how.

At length, the chores for the night being done, Hank turned to him, gruffly:

"Ye kin cum along to the house now!" he said. "I allow the ole man will want ter see ye afore ye turn in!"

"Very well; I am ready," Pete replied.

"You'd better be, an' ye'd better hold a civil tongue in yer head while ye're gittin' whaled, or ye're liable ter cum up missin', like Tom Thornton did!"

"While I'm getting 'whaled'?" Pete echoed.

"Pray, what'll I be 'whaled' for?"

Hank laughed coarsely.

"Oh, them's the ole man's rules. He allers licks a new boy within an inch of his life, to conker his speerit from the start. An' danged ef I don't think he's purty sensible in doin' it!"

"Well, I don't!" Pete retorted, with emphasis, "and until I've merited punishment, I don't propose to submit to it—no, sir-ee!"

"Maybe you won't!" was the significant reply, and at the same instant a powerful grasp seized Pete by the back of the neck, and he was shoved along before the burly farm-hand, as though he had been but an eight-year-old child.

Direct to the rear entrance of the farm-house the bound boy was pushed, thence into a woodshed, and next into a large but dimly-lighted kitchen, where Joshua Fisher and his unamiable spouse were seated at a table. A bottle and glasses were between them, and a heavy "rawhide" whip was lying before the farmer.

"Ha! you've fetched him, hev ye?" old Fisher grunted, as Hank gave Pete a shove headlong into one corner of the room.

"Yas, I've fetched him!" and the ruffian grinned, diabolically. "He allowed he wouldn't take the gad; but I reckon when I snatched him by the back o' the neck he changed his opinion!"

"Oh! I'll 'tend to his case!" Fisher declared, laying hold of the rawhide. "I wasn't a pedagogue fer ten year all fer nothin'! Yank his duds off!"

Pete had by this time regained his feet, and stood facing his enemies, his eyes flashing defiance—for enemies he now knew them to be—brutal, heartless and cruel.

"Strip yourself to the waist!" Hank ordered, grimly. "No monkeyin' about et, nuther, or I'll jerk ye out o' yer skin. Off wi' yer coat an' shirt, I say!"

"I won't!" Pete cried, with emphasis. "I have done nothing to deserve punishment, and I won't stand it!"

"Ye won't, hey?" roared old Fisher, springing to his feet.

"Ye won't, won't ye?" screamed Samantha.

"Oh! ye won't?" chorused the ruffian Hank Honeybee, and with the cry he leaped forward upon the boy.

Pete was not unprepared for the assault. As Honeybee came lunging toward him, he hauled off, and let him have a stinging blow in the face, and then, as that did not check him, he clinched with him, and a desperate struggle ensued.

Although a man of more than ordinary strength, the ruffian found that he had grappled with no baby, for in a few seconds the two went crashing to the floor, a result of Pete's tripping science, and Honeybee was underneath, and the chances were that he would have got the worst of the bargain had not the Fishers interfered at this juncture, and torn Pete from his adversary.

Once relieved of his dangerous antagonist, Honeybee quickly came to the assistance of his employers, and the clothes were literally torn from Pete's form and his feet and wrists securely bound. Then, while Samantha Fisher and Honeybee seized him and held him erect, Joshua Fisher caught the rawhide in a vengeful grasp and applied the lash vigorously to the victim's back.

Every stroke left a bloody mark, and must have caused the most excruciating pain, but the brave youth never uttered a whimper.

His teeth were set, his face was stern and rigid; he stood proudly erect, disdaining the support of the brutes on either side of him, a look of unutterable scorn and defiance in his eyes—stood there a hero, almost a martyr, until the blood ran down his back and sides in streams and his flesh was in numerous instances cut open to the very bone!

Stood there, until the inhuman torture, resolute as he was, deprived him of his senses—then he fell forward, breaking from the grasp of Samantha and Honeybee, and went crashing to the floor.

CHAPTER IV.

THE COLONEL AND JOSIE.

WHEN Poor-house Pete regained consciousness, it was with a keen realization that his lacerated back hurt him terribly, and it was some minutes ere he could get his thoughts sufficiently about him to understand where he was.

When he did, however, he found that his torn clothing had been replaced, and from the smarting of his wounds he was satisfied that salt water had been doused over him, after he became insensible.

He next discovered, as soon as his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, that he was in an unplastered and only partially floored loft, the roof running down from the peak so low that it was with difficulty he could find a spot where he could stand erect.

The bed upon which he had been lying, on recovering consciousness, was composed of a blanket spread upon a pile of corn-husks, and judging by the chaff upon the floor, it served as a bed for mice, as well as human beings.

From the grunting sounds, as well as the odor that arose from below, Pete concluded that his primitive *boudoir* was located directly over a hog-pen, instead of in under the roof of the Fisher residence.

After getting upon his feet, the boy stood for some minutes in thoughtful silence.

Although his back and sides gave him excruciating pain at the least movement, he was satisfied that he had passed through the flogging without receiving any broken bones, and it would be but a matter of time ere he would be himself again.

Should he, after the punishment he had undergone, remain any longer with those human brutes?

It was a question he could not decide upon at once. His spirit said no, with a vengeance, and yet something seemed to tell him that it would be best for him to remain.

His thoughts then went back to the little fairy at the post-office, and her request that he should meet her at the bridge.

"I wonder what time it is?" he mused, peering about him to satisfy himself that he was the sole occupant of the loft.

"I presume likely the young lady has tired of waiting for me and gone home."

Searching his pockets he found a match, and by its feeble light was able to discover the trap-door, which opened out upon the roof. Without much difficulty he shoved the door to one side, for it was unhinged, and in a twinkling was out upon the roof.

The night had undergone a change. The clouds that threatened a storm in the late afternoon had cleared away, and the moon was shining brightly.

With a quick, sweeping glance Pete took in the surroundings. Everywhere within the inclosed grounds silence prevailed. The grim old mansion was dark and silent, and repose seemed to rest upon all nature.

By the moon's position Pete saw that it was not as late as he had at first supposed, and this gave him hope that, if he hastened his movements, he would yet meet his unknown friend at the bridge.

The hog-house was situated so close to the fence, upon one side of the grounds, that it was an easy matter for a person who was upon the roof to drop over into an adjoining grain-field, from where it was but a short distance to the public highway.

After viewing the situation a few minutes in silence, Pete crawled down the roof to the eaves and dropped lightly into the adjoining lot. He then hurried rapidly away, as the savage growl of a dog within the grounds warned him that his drop had been heard.

Making his way around to the road, he followed it until he came to a bridge, rustic of design and constructed of logs and planks.

Upon one of the top girders, to his intense satisfaction, Pete found his little post-office fairy, who arose and put forth her hand, a look of anxiety upon her face.

"Oh! it's nothing!" he said, presuming that she had noticed the blood with which his garments were besmeared. "They gave me a flogging—that's all."

"Indeed! I should say they did! You are covered with blood, and your clothing is terribly torn. Papa, come here!"

In response to this call, a man came from a willow copse near the bridge. He was an elderly man of distinguished appearance, well dressed, and the owner of a luxuriant pair of mutton-chop whiskers. His carriage and general bearing indicated the true gentleman.

He advanced and put forth his hand, his keen gaze dwelling for an instant upon Pete's face most searchingly.

"I am glad to meet you, my boy," he said, earnestly, "but sorry to see that you have been another victim of the Fishers' brutality. What is your name?"

"My name is Peter Perkins, sir," accepting the proffered hand.

"Perkins?" and a shade of color denoting surprise passed over the gentleman's face. "I once had a dear friend by that very name. I am Colonel Jack Joslyn, and this is my daughter Josephine. She is a sort of Good Samaritan, you know, and I allow her to guide me a great deal. She came and told me about the Fishers adopting a new boy, and begged that I should intercede in your behalf, and so I accompanied her here."

"I am pleased to meet you, sir, I am sure," Pete said, frankly. "I feel that you are a gentleman of honor, and I am always glad to meet such people."

"Bravely spoken, my boy—bravely spoken! and may it always be your aim in life to select your associations accordingly!" and a light of enthusiasm entered the colonel's eyes. "But, leaving that aside, I see that you have been whipped."

"Yes, sir."

"For what?"

"No cause that I am aware of—it was, I presume, to break me in, at the start."

"The Fishers adopted you from the poor-house at B—?"

"Yes, sir."

"How old are you?"

"Almost seventeen, sir."

"Indeed! How came you in the institution at that age?"

"My mother died there, sir, and gave me in charge of the superintendent. Respecting her wishes I should have remained there, but that I was forced to be bound out!"

"Why would you have preferred to remain at the poor-house?"

"In order that I might finish learning my trade."

"Your education has not been wholly neglected, I see."

"Oh no, sir. I have had considerable opportunity for attending school, at different times, and then, too, my dear mother was a woman of superior education, and assisted me much in my studies. So that I am really better advanced than the ordinary run of boys of my age."

"You should be proud of that, and I am sorry you are bound out to such people as the Fishers. Do you propose to stay with them, sir?"

"I don't know. It was partly to get your daughter's advice on the matter that I escaped from the grounds, and came here. I don't feel like taking a flogging every day, like the one I got to-night."

"I dare say not, and it may be they won't be so rough on you since your initiation. If they abuse you any more, I will see that you are taken away from them."

"Then you advise me to remain?"

"Yes, for the present at any rate. Were you to run away they could put officers on your track, and have you brought back. So you see that, until you can make a sure case against them, you are their property, and they have the law on their side."

"A sure case, you say. How do you mean?"

"Well, you see, the Fishers are rich, and thus to a considerable extent are influential, brutes as they are. They own several farms, besides this one, and hold first mortgages upon a dozen more estates, and are supposed to have thousands upon thousands of dollars hidden away in that old house. There's a mystery about the Fishers and the house which no one has ever solved. They will receive no visits from the neighbors, nor allow them even to enter their grounds. This course of action has been going on for years; and while it is known that strangers come to the place at the dead of night, and are admitted, no one can understand what they come for or when they go away, as they are not seen to leave."

the place. Some suspicious ones have thrown out dark hints that were an investigation made as to the goings-on within that old house, a revelation would be the result which would surprise the community."

"You think there is something crooked going on, eh?"

"The suspicious ones think that way," Mr. Joslyn said, evasively. "And that is one reason why I should favor the idea of your remaining with the Fishers as long as practicable, as you might be able to find out much that would throw light on the matter."

"All right, then, I'll stay!" Pete decided, heartily. "I've always cherished a desire to become a detective, anyhow, and perhaps this is my chance."

"It may be, if you go about your investigations quietly and cautiously. Indeed, if you find out the secret of the Fishers' seclusion, I'll pay you a round sum out of my own pocket!"

"Very well. I'm henceforth a commissioned detective!" Pete laughed. "If there's anything going on within that inclosure that is not 'on the square,' I'll nose it out, you can bet right royally! Your daughter spoke about another boy. Did he get disgusted and clear out?"

"No! He was found drowned in the lake. I have always had my suspicions that foul play accounted for his death, but there were no signs of violence upon his body, and the coroner's jury brought in a verdict of death from accidental drowning."

"Indeed? Have you ever had dealings with Fisher?"

"Oh, yes! You see that residence yonder, at the bend of the valley? Well, that is where I live. The estate is worth fifty thousand dollars at the least. I bought it of Fisher several years ago, and he still holds a mortgage of ten thousand dollars against it, which I propose to take up in a short time, when due!"

"You are fortunate."

"It is lucky I am so fortunate, for nothing would please Fisher more than to foreclose the mortgage and sell me out. He envies every one their prosperity, and covets all he lays eyes on. Then, too, we are enemies, in another sense. Through years of patient labor I have succeeded in bringing matters to such a state that there is not a drop of liquor or intoxicating beverage sold in this township, which is a large one, and includes four distinct villages within its borders. Through virtue of the power of money, Fisher has fought me desperately, to secure license, but has met with defeat after defeat, until there has come about a strong antagonistic feeling between the license and anti-license factions, the stalwarts of both parties representing a great amount of capital, and I have serious fears that the time is not far off when the opposition will win the day, or else there will be a small-sized civil war over the matter. At all events, Joshua Fisher bears me no love, and we are practically enemies."

"Where does Fisher get his rum?" Pete asked. "I took notice of a bottle and glasses in the kitchen."

"Some that he purchased at B—, perhaps. There is no place where liquor can be got in this township, although I am satisfied that it is more or less generally drunk. Some people have even hinted it, as their belief, that the liquor is not imported from B—, but manufactured within our own borders, but I am not inclined to believe this. Secret stills and 'moonshiners' are all well enough for the Virginias and Carolinas, but are practically out of the question up here in our model State."

Pete looked thoughtful, but did not express any opinion.

"I'll try and find out about it," was his reflection, "and maybe I can stir up some interesting facts, even if I did come from the poor-house."

Aloud he said:

"Well, you ought to be able to judge best about that, to be sure. If at any time I can be of assistance to you, do not hesitate to command me."

"I shall not. I am rather pleased with you, and shall be glad to do anything I can for you."

"And I, too," put in Josephine, who had remained silent during the conversation. "I told papa that I liked your appearance from the first, and after I saw you turn upon the impudent students, I was just delighted."

"I thank you, I am sure, although I am not much used to having people speak well of me. I've been used to receiving blows and curses of late. The students simply imitated their elders in scoffing at a poor-house subject."

"They are a set of insolent young loafers," Colonel Joslyn added, warmly, "and the only pity is that you didn't thrash every one of them."

One of them, named Guy Vaughn, is a sort of king-pin among them, and carries the idea he can run the town because his father chances to be one of the richest men in these parts. He is an overbearing young scoundrel, and I have long since forbidden my daughter to have anything to say to him. Through his father's agency, he may seek to make trouble for you, as Jo tells me you knocked him off his pins. Don't you knuckle under a bit, however. Here is something I wish to warn you never to use, except it be to defend your own life, but it may be useful to keep enemies at a respectful distance. I've seen the time in my life, already, when I would have got a broken head but for having a weapon in my possession," and the colonel handed Pete a handsome revolver of thirty-two caliber, six shots.

"You are very kind, sir," the boy said, earnestly, "and I will accept this as a keepsake from you, trusting, however, that I may never have occasion to use it. If I have to fight at all, I can do enough execution with my fists, providing I can get close enough to use them."

"So I should infer from your victory at the village. And now, as long as you remain with the Fishers, keep your eyes open, and if you make any important discovery, effect your escape and come to me. Or, if their abuse becomes intolerable, come to me, and I will protect you and have the bonds that bind you annulled."

"Thank you, sir; I will be watchful and try and remain long enough to find out something, at any rate."

The Joslyns then shook hands with Pete, and departed to their elegant home, a mile down the valley, while Pete returned toward the farm-house, wondering what the next day had in store for him, and resolved to know what secrets the farm-house contained, if human ingenuity could find them out.

CHAPTER V. A BIT OF MYSTERY.

POOR-HOUSE PETE did not experience much difficulty in getting back into the loft of the pigsty, and here he remained during the rest of the night, not daring to venture down into the farm-yard, for fear of being pounced upon by the watch-dog, whose occasional savage growl announced that he was at liberty within the grounds.

Pete did not go to sleep, however, for his mind was too busied with thoughts of the past, and reflections on the future, to permit slumber.

The morrow might or might not have much in store for him, and he would be only too glad when it came, that he might be relieved of his suspense.

At length the crow of the inevitable barn-yard rooster was heard, heralding the approach of daybreak, and directly afterward the voice of Hank Honeybee sounded up the ladderway which led to the loft:

"Come! come! Stir up thar, younker, and come down. We've all bin to breakfast already, an' yours is a-waitin' on the table. Be lively, now, or you'll git no grub."

Pete pricked up his ears, so to speak. He recognized the voice as unmistakably that of the Honeybee, but it had undergone a change. Last night it had been hoarse and ugly in tone; now it was more kindly.

"Hello! I wonder what it means?" Pete muttered. "He ain't playin' good-natured for nothin', I'm bettin'! Some game ahead!"

Without delay he descended from the "roost," and found Honeybee waiting for him, a lantern in his hand.

"Mornin' to ye, boy!" was the salutation. "Ye see, we're early to bed an' early to rise. Hope ye slept well?"

"Oh, bully!" Pete responded, grimly.

"Eh? Back hurt ye, did et? Pshaw! that's nothin'! Make you tough. Thunderation! I'd 'a' bin dead years ago ef I hadn't got nigh skinned alive two or three times a day, when I was yer build."

"Mebbe so," Pete responded. "If floggings make a feller healthy, I prefer to be on the sick list, you bet!"

"Oh, you'll learn to like 'em after a while. Go in an' get yer breakfast now, and the old man 'll give ye yer orders."

So Pete trudged away toward the house, more puzzled than ever at the hired man's change of demeanor, for the boy had not failed to notice that the Honeybee's left optic was beautifully "painted black" from the effect of his solid blow during the kitchen scrimmage.

"Oh, my! but ain't he of a meek and conciliatory spirit this morning!" Pete muttered; "but I know there's something new on foot. You bet ugly Hank wouldn't wear that black eye so

gracefully if there wasn't some peculiar reason for it."

On reaching the house, he entered boldly. Mrs. Fisher was bustling about, doing her work, while Joshua sat in an easy-chair, smoking a grimy clay pipe, which looked as if it had served a number of years.

The visage of neither the old man or woman was quite so vinegary and disagreeable as on the previous day, and they looked up at Pete's entrance so good-naturedly that he was even more surprised at them than at Honeybee.

"Good-morning!" Joshua Fisher said, taking the pipe from his mouth, and looking Pete over, from head to foot. "So you're up, eh? That's good. An early riser is always smarter than a late sleeper."

"His back is sometimes smarter, at any rate," Pete allowed, dryly.

"Oh! that will be well in a few days, and learn you a lesson never to dispute the authority of your master. I hope you will be a good boy, and you will have an easy time of it living with us. Sit down, now, and eat your breakfast; then I've got something to show you."

"Oh! but ain't you kind and perlit?" Pete mused, as he seated himself at the table and partook of the repast, which, although rather scanty, was an improvement on poor-house fare, to say the least.

"Now, sonny, don't eat too heartily, you know," Samantha said, cautioningly. "You know ye ain't bin used to luxuries, an' if ye overload your stomach it will make you sick. Spread on the butter thin, for it's forty cents a pound, and the pastures aire failin'."

"Oh! there ain't much danger of my getting sick on what's here!" Pete assured, with a twinkle in his eye as he cleaned the bread-plate and gazed about to see what next he should tackle to fill up on. "I'm passionately fond of sirloin steaks, eggs on toast, all sorts of game, jellies, soups and *etceteras*. Don't you have them here?"

"Heavens and earth! D'ye hear him, Joshua?" and Samantha put up her hands in horror. "Goodness me, I believe the boy's out of his head."

"He'll get jerked out o' his jacket ef he goes to puttin' on airs an' 'spectin' sech things here!" Joshua growled.

"Oh! I don't expect 'em!" Pete assured. "It ain't the quality that's stickin' in my crop—it's the quantity. Ain't got two or more slices of bread around, have you?"

"Mercy! You haven't eat all them two slices?" and Mrs. Fisher looked daggers at her spouse. "What did I tell you, Josh Fisher? We will be eat out of—"

"Shut up!" Joshua growled, going to a shelf and helping himself to a swig out of a bottle. "Give the lad what he wants. If he asks for jelly-cake, give it to him. If he wants elephant on toast, see that he has it. You know me!"

"Yas; and you know me!" was the retort. Anyhow, Pete got the desired quantity of bread, and finished a pretty fair sort of a meal.

When he was done and arose, Joshua Fisher also arose.

He then led the way into an adjoining room, which was very dark, and through this into still another room, where he lit a lamp, and afterward opened the window-shutters which admitted the morning light.

It was then that Pete perceived that he was in a large and magnificent parlor, of olden-time style and furnishings. Costly carpeting, curtains, furniture and pictures, were all to be seen for the looking.

What surprised Pete the most, however, was the sight of a well-dressed man, seated in a careless attitude upon an easy-chair.

He had evidently been sitting in the dark prior to the entrance of Pete and Fisher.

His fresh countenance, with its graceful mustache and keen brown eyes, indicated that he was not much past the prime of life, if, indeed, he was that far advanced in years. His general appearance was genial and pleasant, and by his attire one might have judged that he was well-to-do.

He regarded the bound boy inquiringly as Fisher produced the light, and Pete returned the scrutiny with interest, as he stood awaiting orders from the farmer.

"Set down, boy," Joshua ordered, pointing to a seat. "Don't ye know what chairs are made for?"

Without reply, Pete took a seat, the farmer following his example.

"Well, friend, this is the boy. How do you like the looks of him?" Joshua asked of his guest. "Does he come up to yer ideas?"

"Why, I don't know, I am sure. How old is he?" and the man surveyed Pete critically.

"Almost seventeen," Pete spoke up, at a glance from the farmer.

"So old? You do not look it. How came you in the poor-house?"

"Our money gave out when we reached B—, and mother being sick, we had nothing else to do but go there, sir."

"Who was your mother?"

"Rachel Perkins, sir."

"Where were you bound for, when you arrived at B—?"

"For no given point that I was aware of. My mother and I had been traveling from place to place for a number of years."

"Ah! you were tramps, then?"

"No, sir!" Pete replied, quickly and spiritedly, his face flushing with indignation. "We were not tramps, by any means! My mother had money, and we traveled and fared as respectably as any one else."

"Ah! Did you! What of your father? Is he living?"

"I do not know, sir. I think not, however."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because my mother never mentioned him as living."

The gentleman glanced at farmer Fisher, but Pete was not able to interpret the meaning of the glance.

"Well, my lad, what vocation in life do you propose to follow when you are of age?" the gentleman finally went on, after lighting a cigar.

"I intend to be a detective," Pete replied, promptly; but he was sorry a moment later on seeing another exchange of significant glances between the two men.

"A detective? Why, what in the world ever put it into your head to choose such a calling?"

"Oh! I don't know, more than that I despise meanness and rascality, and would like to be the means of helping to check it, sir."

"A very laudable desire, in one sense, my boy, but a man cannot well be a detective and be a man of honor. His profession demands that he be deceitful and treacherous, in order to carry out his business with any degree of success. Why, for instance, supposing your father was one of the blackest of scoundrels, and you were a detective—and your father loved you?"

"He would be unworthy of me, sir, and no more entitled to my respect or mercy than any other bad character!"

"Indeed? As you grow older you probably will change your mind, and be likely to encounter plenty of other professions more suited to you than that of rogue-hunter. My name is St. Clair, and it was my pleasure to know your mother before her marriage. I was a disappointed suitor for her hand. Through the regard I always had for her I intend to befriend you in all possible ways. You shall have all the advantages of education you wish; you shall have all the clothes, jewelry, and everything you wish."

"On conditions, I suppose?" Pete coolly suggested, expecting that was what he was driving at.

"To that I answer no. I expect you to agree to no conditions whatever, more than that you are to make your home here until you are of age, where I'll guarantee everything will be done for your personal comfort. Am I not right, Fisher?"

"You aire!" the farmer grunted. "He shall have the best room, and will have to do nary a stroke of work, more than to feed himself."

"So you see everything will be all O. K!" St. Clair went on. "It will be the same as changing from pauper to prince. Do you wish to attend the school at W—?"

"No!" Pete replied, promptly. "If you propose to do me all the kindness you have mentioned, I would prefer to have a private instructor until I am prepared to stand on an equality with the other students in respect to my studies. Better than all, I would like to have some sort of business occupation—some position of responsibility, for I could study evenings, you see."

"Very well. You shall have the instructor, and the position too, if it can be obtained. I have one in view. And now, as an earnest of my good intentions, I take pleasure in making you a few trifling presents, which you can examine after I am gone," and he here handed Pete a pasteboard box. "To-night you are to come to the Grand Hotel at W— and inquire for Mr. Graham. He will take you in charge, and see that you are fitted out in clothing and other necessities."

"Then am I not to see you any more?" Pete asked, in surprise.

"Very seldom, if at all. In fact, in consideration of what I will do for you, I wish you to promise me that you will not mention having met such a person as I, and if questioned give

evasive answers—at all events, keep it a secret that I am your benefactor. Will you promise?"

"I promise, sir. It all seems very strange to me, however. I cannot understand it. Do you know anything of my father, sir?"

"I know that he is one of the boldest, most cunning and successful scoundrels and desperadoes outside of jail. But there! I can't tell you more. Go and look at your presents, and to-night do as I have directed. Mr. Graham will arrange all other particulars. Good-by!"

"Good-by, sir," Pete said, rising and wonderingly shaking the extended hand of his benefactor. "I can say no better, sir, than I am as thankful for your kindness as it was unexpected, and I shall try to merit it in the fullest."

Then, bowing, he left the room, Joshua Fisher remaining with St. Clair.

Pete was amazed, overjoyed, and mystified, all at once, at his good luck. Surely sunshine from some hitherto foreboding cloud had broken upon him!

But, behind the golden flood, dark and even more foreboding thundercaps were rising, and, so far as Pete was concerned, there were plenty of storm-signals out!

CHAPTER VI.

ARRESTED.

LEAVING the house, for he was not particular about having Samantha's sharp eyes take note of his excitement, Pete sought a secluded part of the grounds, and there seated himself upon the ground, and opened the box of presents which he had received from the mysterious St. Clair.

On removing the lid, the first thing he discovered was a gold watch and chain—a present most elegant. The watch was of gentleman's size, the heavy cases elaborately engraved and studded with diamond chippings. It must have cost a couple of hundred dollars at the least, while, as for the chain, it was a beauty, and proportionately valuable.

"Phew! it's a beauty!" Pete muttered. "Won't I cut a swell, though, if everything turns out as has been promised me?"

Next after the watch came a magnificent cluster diamond ring, and a diamond scarf-pin, the single stone of which was very large, and sparkled dazzlingly, as the sunlight reflected upon it.

Then, there was a fine, four-blade knife, a small pearl-handled pocket-revolver, and a golden locket.

A cry of astonishment escaped Pete's lips as he opened this latter, for before him was the picture of his poor, dead mother, as she had looked in her younger years!

He knew it at a glance, and recognition of the well-known features brought tears to his eyes.

Familiar recollections of her who had ever been so indulgent to him drove away all the pleasant sensations caused by the presents, and he sat for a considerable time and gazed at the face in the locket, mourning for the dear departed.

He at last put the precious locket away in the only whole pocket of his tattered suit, and restoring the gifts to the box, arose just as he heard Joshua Fisher's voice calling him.

As quickly as possible he answered the summons, and found the farmer standing in the kitchen doorway.

"Ah! coming, are ye?" he said, a trifle grimly. "Where ye bin?"

"Out in under the trees, looking at my presents."

"Ye have, eh? What ye been crying about?"

"I was thinking of my poor dead mother, sir."

"Pooh! You mustn't cry over the dead. It aire a sin, fer they're better off than we-uns, here below. Come inside, now; I've hunted up a suit o' better clothes that'll fit ye, 'til ye get to town. Ye'll find 'em, an' water and towels, in the front room, which is to be yourn."

So Pete went inside, and proceeded to better his appearance as best he could.

He found that a comfortable bed had been put up in the parlor, and a bureau and toilet-stand.

A serviceable suit of clothes, a pair of shoes and a straw hat, were also awaiting him, which would, when donned, favorably alter his appearance, at least.

"It's all very strange," he mused, as he went about the job of "fixing up." "Last night these Fishers were true to their own nature in their treatment of me, while now they are acting a lie. They hate me with all power, and yet they are literally as nice as pie—acting a clever drama of deceit. What does it all mean? Something, surely. The longer I remain here the deeper grows the mystery. This man, St. Clair, has, to all in-

tents, worked the miracle. But for what purpose? He isn't doing all this for me, simply because he was once a suitor of mother's—oh no! He's got some deep purpose for his charity, and I am the victim of it. Would to God that I could look ahead, into the future! He said my father was a bold and daring rascal! Can this be true? I hesitate to believe it—yet why was it mother and father did not live together? Oh, this strange, perplexing mystery! I can never rest until I solve it—and solve it I will!"

He soon had himself washed and arrayed in his change of costume, and felt much better, but his back still pained him a great deal, and made any special exertion cost him most excruciating discomfort.

After he was attired he went out about the grounds once more, and as no intimation was given him that he was not free to go whither he willed, he kept his eyes busy and noted everything worthy of notice.

Of the buildings within the inclosure, the house was by far the largest; then came a barn, sheep-pens, cow and horse stables, workshop, and numerous smaller sheds.

His mind was filled with thoughts of what Colonel Joslyn had told him concerning the mystery that enveloped the place, and he meant to find out if there was any peculiarity about the grounds or outbuildings, wherewith the mystery could in any way be associated.

If there was any important secret about Fisher Farm, it must be within the grim old mansion, for there was certainly nothing unnatural or uncommon about things out of doors, as Pete became satisfied after a general exploration and observation.

About noon, while in the vicinity of the big gates, he saw that one of them was open, and heard the sound of angry voices.

Hurrying forward, impelled by curiosity to know what was going on, he soon arrived at the gate.

Upon a little patch of greensward, outside the inclosure, was drawn up a handsome barouche, and a fine span of high-headed bay horses, handled by a liveried negro coachman, who looked very conscious of his own importance.

In the barouche were seated three persons, the most conspicuous among whom was a burly, uniformed policeman.

Next noticeable was a large, broad-shouldered, well-dressed man of middle-age or over, with a flowing brown beard. He it was who was engaged in earnest conversation with Joshua Fisher, who stood near the equipage, leaning upon a pitchfork.

The third occupant of the coach was one of the youths who had participated in the disturbance in front of the village post-office—in fact, the one whom Pete had knocked down first, and whom Colonel Joslyn had called Guy Vaughn.

His left eye was now bandaged with a white silk handkerchief, and his countenance, otherwise, had a rather woe-begone expression.

Peter got but a glance at the situation, and then dropped back behind the fence where he could look through the cracks and listen without being seen.

He realized full well what was the mission of the Vaughns to Fisher Farm. They had come for the purpose of arresting him for his assault upon Guy.

"The beggar is an impudent young whelp, and he shall be punished for his audacity!" the banker was saying, hotly. "The idea of a nameless pauper like him daring to strike a son of mine! We've come for the boy, I say, Fisher, and we want him!"

"An' ye'll have to keep on wantin', fer all me," Joshua replied grimly. "Ther boy did jest right a-wallopin' the gang, an' I gloried in his spunk. Yer son an' the others hedn't no business to trip him, nor to abuse him."

"That's altogether foreign to the matter we have in hand," Banker Vaughn retorted. "Boys will be boys, in the way of practical joking, and are not censurable for any of their mischief. On the other hand, this beggar you have adopted committed an assault upon my son, resulting in a disagreeable, if not a dangerous injury, and is amenable to the law. I have procured a warrant for his arrest and placed it in Officer Logan's hands, and I mean to teach the young rascal a lesson!"

"I am not a rascal!"

Clear and decisive Pete uttered the words as he stepped out from behind the inclosure into full view of the barouche.

"I am not a rascal, neither am I a beggar, nor anything of the sort. I am a boy without friends, and bound to protect myself from insult. I did assault your son, sir, because he put up a contemptible, mean job on me, and, what is more,

I'll repeat the action whenever he tries any more of his tricks. Because I'm a poor boy, sir, it does not signify that I will allow a rich man's son to play what you are pleased to call practical jokes on me!"

The banker's face flamed with anger. "We'll see about it!" he cried, fiercely. "Officer, that is the scamp. Your duty is to arrest him!"

"I'll save you the trouble!" Pete quickly cried, as the officer was about to climb out of the barouche. "I consider myself under arrest. You can drive back to W—, and I will follow, on foot, if you will permit me, as I prefer walking to riding with a bloated aristocrat. His absence is better than his company."

Vaughn and the officer held a short conversation, in an undertone, and then the latter said:

"All right. If you ain't in W—, within an hour, I'll lock you up when I do get you!"

The carriage drove off, and Pete concluded that about all there would be of the matter would be a fine on appearing before the magistrate, and if he paid the fine he would be discharged; but, where was he to get the fine money from?

He was deliberating over this question as he turned around, facing farmer Fisher.

"Wal, you've done et, ain't ye?" the old man said, sourly. "You've put yer foot in it, now, for sure! Why in Satan didn't ye stay out of sight?"

"It wouldn't have mattered," Pete replied, unconcernedly. "The officer could have made you give me up, and so I chose to speak for myself when the man called me a rascal!"

"No officer dares to venture on my premises!" was the gruff declaration. "Ye orter kept out o' sight. What ye goin' ter do 'bout it now?"

"Going to W— and face the music, of course. I'm not scared!"

"Mebbe not; but you'll get fined. How ye goin' ter pay et?"

"I don't know. Guess I'll have to go to the 'jug' for a couple of weeks."

"More'n that, maybe. But you g'lang to W—, and I reckon mebbe things will turn out all right!" and, without further comment, the brusque farmer turned and strode toward the house.

After a few minutes of deliberation, Pete started on foot for W—, wondering if the old man's words implied anything.

As he passed the house of Colonel Joslyn he gazed at it hopefully, in expectation of seeing the genial colonel, but was doomed to disappointment.

Arriving in the village he was met by the officer, Logan, who walked with him to the magistrate's office.

"It's a blasted shame," the blue-coat allowed, as they walked along. "'Cause a feller's poor these rich snobs stand ready to pick on him, and try to crush him, at every turn. Ye served young Vaughn right, my lad—just right! He's an ornery mean skunk, an' it's a pity ye didn't black his t'other eye."

"I reckon the Vaughns will try hard to get me sent up, won't they?"

"Guess so; but, you tell your story as it is, an' don't let 'em bluff you, an' Joe Hodge is the magistrate as won't take a mean advantage over you, because you are poor, although I expect he'll feel obliged to fine you a bit, out o' fear o' Vaughn's kickin' up a big muss. Have you got any money?"

"Nary a red! But, if you will go to the Grand Hotel and tell a Mr. Graham about it I guess he'll fix it all right."

"I'll do it. I'd like to see the Vaughns cheated out of their contemplated satisfaction."

So the officer accompanied Pete as far as the door of the magistrate's court, and then went on his errand.

When Pete walked boldly into the office, as proud and erect as a young knight, he perceived that the large apartment contained quite a little gathering of people, some sitting and others standing about, waiting for the hearing to take place.

Among others, he was both surprised and glad to see Colonel Joslyn and his pretty daughter, Josie.

Both advanced and shook the boy warmly by the hand, which seemed to cause a little surprise to the others of the gathering, especially to Guy Vaughn and his father, who looked their disapproval.

"My young friend, I am sorry that your coming to our midst has turned out so inauspiciously," the colonel said, "but I guess there will be no trouble in fixing matters all right."

"Of course there won't," Josie chimed in, encouragingly, "and this will turn out all to your advantage. I'll tell all the girls about that pu-

sillanimous Guy Vaughn, and they'll be just wild to see you, for there's very few that likes him—the cowardly snob."

"I am very thankful for your kindly interest in me," Pete replied, his cheeks somewhat flushed, "and only hope I may always be worthy of your esteem."

Just then Officer Logan entered, whereupon the magistrate, a fat, good-natured-looking man, rapped upon his desk, and called the stentorian cry of—

"Order!"

And there was a general stampede for seats.

CHAPTER VII.

WAYSIDE VOICES.

WHILE others were taking seats, officer Logan escorted Pete to a sort of prisoner's dock.

As soon as order was gained, the magistrate turned to banker Vaughn.

"Mr. Vaughn, we will now hear your case. Is the prisoner at the bar the person against whom you have preferred your charge?"

"Exactly!" the banker said, rising.

"Very well; you can remain seated. Young man, what is your name?"

"Peter Perkins, sir."

"Where do you belong?"

"I am living with Joshua Fisher at present, sir."

"How old are you?"

"Close upon seventeen."

"Well, sir, there has been a charge preferred against you of assault and battery upon one Guy Vaughn, son of our estimable citizen, Mr. Vaughn, the banker. It appears from the statement hereset forth that in leaving the post-office of this village, yesterday, you stumbled over a rope which lay stretched across the platform and fell down. Springing to your feet, you rushed upon Guy Vaughn and struck him repeatedly in the face. Now, sir, what have you to say to this charge?"

"I pronounce it partly untrue!" Pete replied, spiritedly. "As I came from the post-office, this fellow, Vaughn, and another fellow, held the rope up so that, paying no attention to them, I stumbled over it. Any one would have tripped who was not prepared for the trap. I struck upon my face, and it hurt me, and I was naturally mad. So, springing to my feet, I made a rush for the gang, who were enjoying my discomfiture, and Vaughn chanced to be the first one I struck, he having held one end of the rope. I knocked him down with one blow, and so the charge that I struck him several times is simply a falsehood."

"That will do. Guy Vaughn!"

Young Vaughn arose, and was sworn.

"It is set forth in this charge, Master Vaughn, to which you made oath, that Peter Perkins struck you several times" the magistrate said, severely.

"So he did!" the banker's son stoutly asserted. "He struck me three times over the left eye!"

"He must be a rather precise marksman," the magistrate observed, dryly. "Have you any proof that he struck you three times? Have you any witnesses who will swear that they saw the three blows struck?"

"Yes, I have. Here's Tom Maybury and George Judson, who saw it," and the banker's son turned to two of his gang.

"Masters Maybury and Judson, you will come up and be sworn!" the magistrate ordered.

"We'd rather not," Judson faintly articulated. "We turned and got out of the way—"

"And did not see the three blows struck?"

"No, sir."

"There appears to be a little perjury about this matter!" the magistrate observed, severely.

"Master Perkins, have you any witnesses?"

"No, he has not!" Mr. Vaughn said, importantly and angrily. "It's a clear case against the young beggar, Hodge, and I want him sent up!"

Hodge's steel-gray eyes glittered, coldly. "I am hearing this case, sir!" he replied.

"Here! I saw the attack!" Josie Joslyn cried, rising in her seat. "May I testify, sir?"

"Certainly. The more the merrier."

So Josie made oath, and testified to witnessing Peter strike young Vaughn, and knock him down, with a single blow.

The magistrate frowned as she took her seat.

"Mr. Vaughn," he said, addressing the banker, who looked very much enraged at the turn affairs had taken, "it is plain that your son has perjured himself, out of a mean intention, to, if possible, make Master Perkins out a liar, and bring upon him a heavier sentence. You must admit that this is neither honorable nor just, and while personally I heartily commend Master

Perkins for his pluck, I shall have to impose a fine of ten dollars upon him or two weeks' imprisonment. As for your son, I shall fine him fifty dollars, as a lesson to adhere to the truth in the future, and to forbear insults to those he regards as beneath him."

"This is an outrage!" the banker raved.

"It is my decision!" Hodge replied, briefly. "I am put here for a purpose, and have the power to carry it out—so parley is useless, and I warn you not to question the court!"

"I'll pay my son's fine!" Vaughn scowled, taking out a well-filled purse. "The insolent beggar can go to jail."

"I will settle for his fine," a man said, who had just stepped into the office. "Here is the money, sir," and he handed a note to the magistrate, who immediately apprised Peter that he was discharged from custody.

The man who paid the fine was a well-dressed, middle-aged, brown-bearded individual, who looked as if he might be well-to-do, and who evidently was somewhat of a stranger in W—, as no one appeared to recognize him.

Immediately after paying Peter's fine he turned and quitted the office, without even a glance at the one he had benefited.

"Who was that man?" Colonel Joslyn asked, as Peter accompanied him and Josie from the office.

"If he's who I think he is his name is Graham; but, that is all I know about him," Pete answered, evasively.

The colonel evidently saw that Peter did not care to be questioned too closely about this strange benefactor, and so made no further inquiries, but soon excused himself and Josie, and they entered a dry-goods store.

Peter was not sorry. His mind was busied in wondering what was best to do. Should he call upon his benefactor at once, or await until night?

It took him some time to decide, since the man had scarcely noticed him at the magistrate's office.

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained," he finally muttered. "I might as well interview the gentleman while I'm here and thus save another trip."

He had no difficulty in finding the Grand Hotel, which was the principal hostelry of the place.

As he entered the hotel office, and paused a moment to look about him, Mr. Graham came forward.

"Ah! how do you do, sir?" he said, cordially extending his hand. "I presumed you would come over here, and so did not wait for you at the magistrate's office. You want to see me, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir; I was directed to see you."

"Exactly. Well, I can attend to your case as well now as at any time. In fact, I have already made some arrangements in your behalf. Mr. Talbert!"

And he called to a gentleman not far off, who immediately approached.

He was a pleasant-looking man, with the word "business" delineated in his general appearance and movements. He had, however, a certain expression which indicated the man of firm resolution and candor.

"Mr. Talbert, this is the lad I was speaking to you of, and I don't believe you could select a better party to serve you. Master Perkins, this is Mr. Timothy Talbert, our postmaster."

Peter acknowledged the introduction in his frank, easy manner, and waited for developments.

"Mr. Talbert is one of the first citizens of this place," Graham went on, addressing Peter, "and I have succeeded in persuading him to give you a position in the post-office—that is, if he thinks you fitted for the position."

"I presume I can work the lad in," Talbert said, eying Pete keenly. "The two positions, however, are important ones, and I shall require you to give bonds for his good behavior."

"The bonds are all ready for signing," Graham assured.

"Very well. I suppose you can read, write and spell correctly, Mr. Perkins?"

"Certainly, sir."

"How are you in mathematics?"

"Better than many boys of my age. I have mastered algebra."

"Indeed? Well, sir, at the solicitation of this gentleman, I have concluded to give you a trial. You will begin your duties as my deputy postmaster to-morrow, and your work will be to make up and distribute the mails, and occasionally attend the money-order and registered-letter window in case for my absence. In addition to this, Mr. Graham has secured you a

position of money-agent for the — Express Company, who hold out at the post-office for the present. So, you see, you will have your hands full, and it will require your most faithful attention if you keep the positions. Do you think you are capable of assuming so much responsibility?"

"Yes," Pete replied without hesitation. "I never tackled but one thing yet that I could not understand."

"And what was that?"

"Why, you see, I'm in the dark as to the reason of my running against such a windfall of good luck since I came here—and I a perfect stranger, too."

"Oh! well, some people were born under a lucky star, you know," the postmaster replied, and then turned away.

Graham next took Peter in charge, and they began a shopping tour. As a result, in a short time the bound-boy was "togged" out in a first-class business-suit, and was the owner of a handsome dress-suit, which with a large and varied supply of furnishing goods was ordered sent to Fisher Farm.

New shoes and new hat, together with a white shirt, cuffs, a collar and a cane completed his outfit, and thus arrayed, and wearing his watch and chain, and diamond ring and pin, he looked as "fly" as any of the young aristocrats in W—.

After he was fixed out Mr. Graham accompanied him to the post-office, where the proceedings were gone through with that made him both deputy postmaster and agent of the — Express Company's money-department—a responsibility that many an older person would have shrunk from.

But Peter had a superabundance of true grit and ambition, and now that such a magnificent opportunity was afforded him to make a rise in life he meant to make the best of it.

He was next given his initiatory lesson in the postal service, with its various workings, and instructed in regard to his duties in the employ of the Express Company, so that by the time it was dark he had a very clear understanding of what he would have to do, and felt quite competent to begin work in the morning.

He and Mr. Graham then left the post-office, and shaking hands parted company, and Peter set out on foot for Fisher Farm.

To say that he was elated would be to state the facts mildly. He could not have expressed his own feelings for the life of him. The sudden and unexpected avalanche of good fortune that had fallen upon him since his adoption from the poor-house at B— was certainly enough to turn any boy's sober mind topsy-turvy, while to Peter the whole affair was involved in a haze of mystery to him quite impenetrable.

"Oh! there's something in it all!" he muttered, as he hurried along toward the Fisher Farm. "No boy is hauled out of the poor-house and put a-straddle such a bonanza as this, all for nothing. There's some deep motive for giving me this boost, or I don't know A from X; but what is it? That's for me to find out, I suppose. Mebbe I ought not to be curious, however. The two positions pay me eighty dollars a month, which is enough sight better than eatin' poor-house chuck. By the way, I wonder if Miss Josie has been discharged?"

He had particularly noticed that the colonel's pretty daughter had not returned to the post-office; but he refrained from asking any questions. It occurred to him, however, that she might have been discharged, although his installment had nothing to do with her removal, as her duties were to assist at distributing the mail and attend to the general delivery and stamp windows.

Peter had become so favorably impressed with her appearance that he was in hopes she would remain at the post-office as long as he held a position there.

Midway between the village and the colonel's stately residence was a high, dense hedge-fence at either side of the road, and extending for a quarter of a mile or more.

Pete was walking lightly along, thinking of pretty Josie, and building air-castles for future use, when a loud, coarse laugh greeted his hearing.

There was something so significant and villainous about the laugh that he involuntarily paused and listened.

The night was densely dark, for the sky was again overcast with inky clouds that threatened soon to part and let down a deluge of rain, so that, although he peered inquiringly about him, Pete was unable to see anybody.

From the sound of the laugh, however, he judged that one or more persons were ahead of

him, and that they were over the hedge on the left-hand side of the road.

"I wonder if Guy Vaughn hasn't put up a job on me, and got some roughs to lay in wait for me?" was the first thought that popped into Pete's head. "They shall find me ready for them, however."

He drew the revolver which Colonel Joslyn had given him, and advanced stealthily in the direction from whence had come the sound, his footfalls as light as those of a dog.

As he proceeded the sound of voices became more and more distinct.

Some one was lying in wait on the other side of the hedge!

CHAPTER VIII.

AN OVERHEARD CONVERSATION.

PETE had not the least doubt but what young Vaughn would seek revenge for the cutting reproach he had got at the hands of Magistrate Hodge, and that he, Peter, would be the special object of the spite.

Nor was there much reason to doubt that the elder Vaughn would sanction any meanness his son might plan; hence it was but natural for Pete to conclude that, whoever was concealed behind the hedge, was not there for any other purpose than to do him personal injury.

From the road-track to the hedge, grass grew soft and tender, and Pete was enabled to steal along noiselessly, and in this way he reached a position within a few feet of where the voices were audible.

Here he crouched upon foot and knee, with his revolver ready for use, and waited and listened.

As near as he could form an idea, there were two men, who were sitting upon the ground, and one of them, at least, if not both, was smoking a foul-smelling pipe.

As to what was their personal appearance or character, Peter could only judge from their conversation.

"Yas, Jim, I tell 'er, thar's goin' ter be a split, an' that afore long, t c. I've noticed that there hain't been a general lovin' feelin' for some time, an' I expect an explosion any minnit!"

The other man grunted disapprovingly.

"Humph! ye're allus makin' a mount'in out of a mole-hill, Jack Bender. Thar ain't nothin' wrong, an' ye're 'spicious without cause."

"I don't believe a word of et. I'm fer demandin' my six months' wages an' skinnin' out afore suthin' pukes."

"Git out! I ain't a bit skeered, ner is any one else 'cept you. Why, ain't we got the best o' the bargain? S'posin' there was a bu'st-up—what would et amount to? Money will gloss over many a matter."

"Oh, mebbe, as fur as that part is concerned. But the t'other part ain't so purty. I've looked between bars all I keer about. Ef the blank was discovered, et is almost sart'in ther other blank would be rooted out, an' there'd be a sweet smell."

"If so, how d'ye s'pose it would hurt us?"

"Why, I'd rather be sittin' out West, eatin' prairie-dog, that's all."

"Look-ee here, Jack, yer've not got much faith!"

"Darned little!"

"S'posin' some one knowed it?"

"I wouldn't keer. I ain't goin' ter burn my fingers."

"Ye're a fool. Joslyn don't quite run the town yet, and, what's more, he won't! One o' these days there'll be some one found with a cracked head."

"Get out! Joslin an' his party are in power, and they'll stay there."

"Not by a jugful. Sech men as Gilbert Vaughn ain't takin' water—not when they can get whisky!"

"Mebbe not. But The Crank and Vaughn don't love one another much, I opine, ef courtesy do oblige 'em to pass the time of day. Thar war a time when they used to suck thru the same straw, but o' late thar seems ter be a sort o' rupture atwixt 'em."

"What of that? Ye don't suppose The Crank would squeal, do you?"

"If he got in a tight place, yes."

Here there was a pause of several minutes, and then Jack said:

"There's one thing sure. The captain ain't so jolly as he used to be—acts sorter nervous all the time, an' as if he expected a stab in the back any minute. I'd quicker think o' his turnin' traitor than The Crank."

"I've noticed that. I don't count on his doin' no mean deal, tho'. Bizness is dull, both ways, an' he dassn't do any work without he's positive about the safety part."

"How d'ye think he an' The Crank jibes?"

"I don't know. While ther's a make-believe of genuine satisfaction, I believe one is 'spicious of the other. Anyhow, the capt'in acts queer sence The Crank adopted the beggar-boy, an' I sha'n't be s'prised ef we git an order to knock the kid on the head."

"Likely. Well, I'll fill my pipe, an' let's go to the willage. Thar's no use o' our stayin' heer all night."

Pete heard them arise to take their departure, at which he skurried away, and got out of their vicinity.

"So much for listening," he muttered. "There is no longer a doubt in my mind but what an organization of some sort exists, in which Joshua Fisher, Vaughn, a captain, and likely several other men are interested. It must be my business to ferret out the matter at such times as I am not otherwise employed."

Resolved to keep what he had overheard to himself, for the present, he continued on his way and soon reached the mansion of Colonel Joslyn.

He was passing by, when Josie, apparently on the wait for him, ran out of the gate.

"Why, Mr. Perkins! I do believe you were going right by, instead of stopping to let us congratulate you. Come, now—papa is waiting for you, on the porch!" and she pulled Peter along so resolutely that he found it necessary to accompany her.

Colonel Joslyn greeted Peter heartily when he reached the porch.

"Perkins, my boy, I congratulate you," he said. "This new friend of yours is doing it up fine for you, eh?"

"It looks some that way," Pete replied oddly. "You seem to have heard about it, sir?"

"Oh, yes—heard about it just before I left W—. It is all over town that you have been made deputy-postmaster and express-agent, and this Mr. Graham seems to be quite a mysterious and influential personage, albeit he is a stranger in these parts. I suppose you will be besieged with queries concerning him."

"None of which I can answer, except that he has done me a good turn without my ever having known him before," Pete replied.

"It's strange, by Jove, and yet, none the less fortunate, as far as you are concerned."

"So it is. I am quite unable to understand it myself. When I came here, from B—, I should have as quickly expected to see the heavens fall as to have tumbled into the position I have. You have not left the post-office, I trust?" and Peter turned to Josie.

"Yes, sir; I was given notice, this noon, that my services would be dispensed with. So I left."

"Indeed? Why, I am sure, if I had known that I was in any way to hurt your prospects, I'd have refused the position."

"Not at all, sir," Colonel Joslyn said, quickly.

"I am aware it has, for some time, been Talbert's intention to dismiss my daughter. You see, the fact of it is, an attempt is being actively made to hurt me all that is possible. A charter is expected to be given W—, as a city, between now and election time, and I am talked of as nominee as mayor by certain ones of both political parties, and the chances are a hundred to one, almost, that I would be elected, as I have done much for the people on the anti-liquor cause, and were I elected mayor, the opposition party are aware that there would be no license, which is their principal object in wishing to get a city charter. My defeat would benefit such men as Gilbert Vaughn, Joshua Fisher, Postmaster Talbert, and several others, who are said to own a large brewery and distillery, in an adjoining county, which would net them a great profit, annually, providing they could make a market for their stuff in W—."

"Mr. Joslyn, are you sure there is not a distillery already in operation, in this township, in which these men are interested?"

"Yes. Or, if there is such a distillery, it is an illicit one, unknown to the revenue officers. Why?"

"Oh, nothing, in particular. I merely put the question to draw forth your opinion. I have another question. Do you know, Colonel Joslyn, anything of my past, or of that of either my mother or father?"

The query was evidently unexpected, for the colonel gave Pete a quick, searching glance.

"Why do you ask that?" he demanded.

"Because I believe you do know much about me that I do not know," Peter declared, frankly. "If you do know anything about me I wish you would tell me."

The colonel gnawed at the ends of his mustache a moment, and gazed at the floor.

"Well, I suppose I can tell you," he responded finally, "but it isn't much, nor will it prove very interesting news to you. Years ago I was a suitor for your mother's hand, and engaged to be married to her. Her name was Rachel Montgomery. Shortly before we were to have been married, I was called West on a business trip, and was perforce absent several months. On my return to the home of my bride-to-be, I was surprised and grieved to learn that, owing to a letter she had received, purporting to have been written by me on my death-bed, she had married a suitor of short acquaintance, and had departed for parts unknown. She left the letter behind, and I obtained possession of it. It said that 'I, being on my death-bed, released her of her engagement, and was unworthy of her, as I already had a wife and children in another State.' The letter was from a Western town. The writing was somewhat like mine, but by careful search I found that it was exactly like the chirography of Paul Perkins, the man she had married.

"It was a terrible blow to me, for I loved your mother dearly, and fancied she loved me. But, of course, such a letter was enough to turn any woman's heart. I afterward learned that Perkins had deserted her and their child, and was one of the worst wretches out of jail—an outlaw and everything that was bad. I swore, then, that if my life was spared long enough, I would yet meet him and have his life. There's a little Southern blood in my veins, and it boils at insult or wrong. As for you and your mother, I sought for you, even after I married, but all to no avail. When I saw you, however, and heard your name, I knew beyond doubt that you were the offspring of her who was once my affianced bride. Your father I have heard of frequently, as being connected with criminal transactions, but I have never met him, or seen his face."

The colonel finished by drawing a long breath, as though it were a relief to get through with the explanation.

There were several minutes' silence without a word being spoken.

"I am very glad you told me," Peter finally said. "I have always longed to know of my father. I guess I'll have to be going now, as the Fishers retire early."

"Well, do not forget to call, my boy, as you pass; as I shall always take a hearty interest in your welfare. Somehow you seem like one of my own family. If you make any discoveries of importance let me know."

"I will do so," Peter replied, and bidding them good-night, he took his departure.

"More and deeper grows the mystery," he mused. "If St. Clair was a suitor, and Colonel Joslyn a suitor, my mother must have been much sought after. How sad that she should link her fate with a man so bad as my father is said to be! Maybe—"

Whatever he might have said remained unspoken, and he hurried on rapidly, for he was desirous of obtaining a much-needed rest, preparatory to entering upon his duties at the post-office on the morrow.

Just before he reached the gate of the farmhouse, a man suddenly leaped out of the darkness and seized him by the arm.

"Hist!" he said, in a hoarse voice, bending his masked face close to Pete's. "Read this when you go to bed. It will cause you pleasant dreams!"

He then loosened his grasp and darted away, after thrusting a piece of paper into Pete's hand.

Later, when in his room, Pete examined it. It was a common piece of white paper a few inches square, and the only words upon it were: "Watch how you go! Treachery to your benefactor means death!"

CHAPTER IX.

AT THE POST-OFFICE.

PETE began his work at the W— post-office on the following morning, and by strict attention to the directions Mr. Talbert gave him, got through the day successfully, and without making a mistake.

The second day his duties came easier to him; he was more self-possessed and confident, and no one would have supposed, from his free-and-easy way of doing business, but what he had grown accustomed to his business from several years' experience.

A week passed without any incident occurring worthy of special mention.

Mr. Graham dropped in to give him a pleasant nod daily; the young "bloods" of the town treated him with more respect; and the pretty

maidens became so frequent in their applications for letters and stamps that Pete began to believe that they were "stuck" on him.

Nights he spent at the farm-house in study and reading.

Samantha, no longer sour and crusty to him, seemed to exert herself to make his room comfortable and his meals tempting, while old Joshua smoked away at his grimy pipe, and gave an occasional nod of approval.

Although ever wide awake, Pete had not succeeded in making any discoveries to prove that old Fisher and divers other persons were engaged in crooked business of any sort.

Every evening, after his work was done, he called a few moments at the Joslyn residence on his way to Fisher Farm and chatted with Josie and the colonel, who always appeared glad to see him.

One morning, after he had been in the post-office over a week, he set out rather earlier than usual for the village, for he had some personal errands to do before it was time to go to the office.

As he neared Joslyn Hall, as the colonel's place was named, he saw the colonel standing by the roadside, evidently awaiting the boy's approach.

"I wonder what brings him out so early, for he is usually a late sleeper," Peter muttered, as he advanced. "He looks anxious about something or other. I hope Josie is not sick, anyhow."

As he approached the colonel he perceived that the gentleman was in a very perturbed state of mind.

"Why, colonel, what—?" Peter began.

"I am ruined!" the colonel gasped, covering his face with his hands—"my God! Perkins, I am a ruined man!"

"Ruined!" Peter echoed in amazement.

"Yes, ruined!" was the agonized reply. "My house was entered last night while we were all asleep, my safe forced open, and all my money—every cent I had in the world—stolen. By Heaven! I believe I shall go crazy!"

"This is startling news, indeed!" Peter said, anxiously. "How much are you the loser?"

"There were over thirteen thousand dollars in the safe. Ten of it was to go to-morrow to pay off the mortgage Joshua Fisher holds against this place."

"Phew! then you won't be able to lift the mortgage?"

"Of course not. The place will have to go under the sheriff's hammer."

"Not so bad as that, I hope. Probably Fisher will grant you an extension?"

"Oh, no, not he!" and the colonel laughed oddly. "He hates me too much, and will be only too eager to take the quickest possible advantage of my loss. He will gloat with triumph over my downfall!"

"Do you not know where you can raise the amount on a second mortgage? You said the place is worth fifty thousand dollars!"

"No. The men who could help me if they would to such a sum, are on the outs with me, because I belong to the anti-liquor party."

"It is a bad affair," Peter said reflectively, "and comes at a bad time. How did the burglars gain entrance?"

"They forced a lower window. They were no amateurs at the business. They got into the house, opened the safe by its combination and a false key to the inner door, removed their booty and made their escape by the way they had entered!"

"And left no clew behind?"

"None whatever."

"I suppose you have no idea what hour the robbery took place?"

"No. Myself and daughter slept very soundly, having been fatigued from a trip to the city yesterday. The hired help sleep in the attic, and could not well have heard the burglars."

"Is your daughter cognizant of the robbery?"

"Yes; and nearly distracted. The blow will fall heavily on her."

Peter accompanied the colonel into the house, and they found Josie in the parlor, her eyes showing the effects of recent weeping.

"Oh, Mr. Perkins!" she cried, springing up and seizing Peter by the hands, "isn't it awful? Oh! can't you do something to help us?"

"You may rest assured I shall try to," Pete replied, earnestly. "Do you have any suspicions in regard to who the robbers may have been?"

"None, sir; unless the deed was committed in behalf of Joshua Fisher, to enable him to foreclose on the property."

"If he was interested, I'll almost vouch he had nothing to do with the affair personally."

I sat up reading 'most all night, and am certain the old man did not leave the house."

"Then who in God's name could have done the deed?"

"From all that I know now, I should say it was the work of an experienced cracksman," Peter answered. "I may be wrong, however. What action do you propose to take?"

"What else is there to do but put the matter in the hands of the police and detectives?"

"Perhaps that is your best plan. But, I've an idea. Supposing you were to publish a notice, to the effect that if the robbers would return half the plunder, no questions would be asked, and they could retain the other half!"

"What object would there be in my making such a move as that? The burglars have got the whole of the money, and no doubt feel secure in its possession; therefore they'd not be apt to give up half for the sake of retaining half, when they could as well keep the whole."

"Maybe not; but I frequently read of instances of thieves returning part of the plunder."

"Well, I'll think about it."

"Do so. Believe me, sir, I shall try my best to work up this case myself, but as I shall do so on the quiet, I don't want my name mentioned in connection with it. Get all the detectives you like, and set them to work—they will in no wise interfere with me."

"All right, my boy. Do your best, and God will reward you, if I cannot!"

"Oh, yes, and I feel sure you will succeed, Mr. Perkins!" Josie said, placing her hands upon his shoulder, and looking confidently into his eyes; "and if you can discover the robbers, and bring them to justice, I am sure papa and I shall owe you a debt of gratitude that we could never hope to cancel."

"I will do all I can for you, Miss Joslyn, and your confidence will no doubt go a long way in encouragement. If your father were to follow my proposition, I've an idea it would be much easier to nail the robbers."

"I will do as you suggest," the colonel said. "I will accompany you to W— at once."

He rung and ordered the family carriage, and shortly afterward he and Peter were en route for the village.

"If your place were sold at mortgage sale, how much would you realize out of it, above ten thousand?" Pete asked, thoughtfully, as they rode along.

"Very little, if anything. Gilbert Vaughn would likely be the only bidder, and he'd give as little as possible. He has had an eye on the place, for his son, in case I ever should fail or have to sell."

When they reached W—, the colonel telegraphed to the city for a brace of detectives, and the news of the burglary spread throughout the town.

Of course the colonel had a great many sympathizers; and also, on the other hand, many were secretly exultant over his downfall, and stood ready to push him to the wall, should they get a chance.

In that afternoon's paper, a full report of the burglary was given, and it also stated that it was Colonel Joslyn's belief that the crime was committed by persons living in the town of W—, and that there was every reason to believe the burglars would be apprehended.

In the same issue there was also a notice published, as follows:

"NOTICE.—If the burglar or burglars, who robbed my house, will return me half of the money they stole, I will allow them to keep the other half."

—COLONEL JOSLYN.

This advertisement caused the colonel's enemies to smile broadly, and tap their foreheads significantly, by which they intended to suggest that, in their opinion, the colonel was either unpardonably "green," or else was shattered mentally.

As for Poor-house Pete, he laid aside the paper, after reading the notice, and ran his fingers through his hair reflectively.

"Somehow I've an idea it will work!" he muttered. "I'll be on the watch, anyhow."

CHAPTER X.

A THREAT.

COLONEL JOSLYN found little comfort in remaining in W—, and after perfecting such arrangements as he deemed necessary, he returned to Joslyn Hall, dispirited and downcast, and spent the forenoon in pacing to and fro across the broad piazza.

He had come of a proud and loyal Virginia family, and had inherited the pride of his parents. Not an unreasonable pride was it, but he

felt that he was equal in birth and station to any of the nabobs of W—, and had brought himself to be recognized as such.

Now, however, with ruin staring him in the face, he realized too keenly the humiliation he and Josie must undergo; they must absent themselves from the social circles of which they had hitherto been particular lights, they were poor, and their pride must suffer its fall.

It was not this fact that was so galling to the proud colonel, as the knowledge that, with his loss of wealth, he was eminently sure to lose a large part of his local power and popularity, and those who opposed him would gain vantage-ground, through his weakness, and gloating with triumph, would win their long-coveted victory.

The shock had affected Josie none the less severely than it had her father, although in a different way. It was socially that she would feel the loss most keenly. Those among whom she had been a little queen heretofore, would take every opportunity to politely remind her that, by loss of fortune, she had also lost prestige among them.

Toward noon Joshua Fisher, returning from W—, drew rein before Joslyn Hall, and motioned to the colonel, who still paced the piazza, to come down to the gate.

Regaining his self-possession by a mighty effort, the colonel strode down the granite walk with a haughty carriage and a face perfectly calm.

He surmised what was coming, but had steeled himself to meet the occasion like a hero.

Joshua sat stolidly upon the high spring seat of his lumber-wagon, his face no more grim than usual, and watched the colonel's approach rather thoughtfully.

"Howdy do!" he said, as the colonel paused just within the gate. "I've jest bin over to W—, and heard about your loss. Jehosephat, I don't wonder you're put out. Hev'n't got no idea who did the job, I suppose?"

"I have no clew whatever, at present," Mr. Joslyn replied, calmly.

"That's bad," the old man said, in a tone so sympathizingly earnest that the listener gazed at him more studiously. "It took my breath clean away when I heard about it. I s'pose the little one takes it hard, too?"

"That would be but natural, sir. She is not yet schooled to meet misfortune as bravely as some of her sex."

"No, I s'pose not. I allers kinder took to her, though she was sassy. Have you set the officers to work?"

"Yes, but I despair of their accomplishing much right away. I suppose you will foreclose the mortgage to-morrow?"

Old man Fisher gave an odd grunt.

"I can't say ef I would or not, if I held it," he replied, snapping his whip at a fly on the nigh horse's back. "They all give me the benefit of a hard name; but I don't know but what there's meaner men than me. Anyhow, the mortgage is out of my hands!"

"Out of your hands?" the colonel echoed, in surprise.

"Yes, these three weeks. I got cramped for money, and sold the mortgage to Gilbert Vaughn, for eight thousan', spot cash."

Colonel Joslyn's teeth went hard together, and a strange glitter entered his eyes.

"Joshua Fisher, you are a rascal!" he said, pointedly. "It is your triumph that I am crushed. You say you were hard up for money. That is a lie. You have money in that old mansion without limit. Why didn't you come to me if you wanted money?"

Fisher did not reply, but continued to aim his whip-lash at the fly.

A harsh laugh escaped the colonel.

"No! no!" he went on, "you would rather have cut off your right hand than to have given me a chance to become absolute owner of Joslyn Hall, you liquor fiend! Vaughn offered you a fat purse for the mortgage, and you sold it—but not because you needed the money—oh! no."

"You don't talk right," the farmer said, slowly. "If you knew what I know you wouldn't flare up so!"

"And if you knew what I know!" the colonel retorted, warmly, "you'd never have thought it advisable to sell that mortgage. You are an old man, Joshua Fisher, but you are as old in sin as you are in years, and mark me, you will be sorry you ever pitted your strength against Jack Joslyn!"

The colonel's appearance indicated that he meant what he said. His eyes flashed sternly; his attitude, his whole appearance was that of a man who was prepared for war.

His words did not appear to strike Joshua

Fisher favorably, for the old farmer moved uneasily upon his seat, and acted decidedly nervous.

"What d'ye mean?" he demanded.

"I mean that I know what would send you to prison were I inclined to use the knowledge!" the colonel exclaimed, looking his sternest. "Your days at the farm are numbered!"

The words rung out stern and clear.

Several men of W—, who were passing in a barouche, just then, overheard them, but gave them no particular thought at the time.

"Oho! my days are numbered, are they?" old Joshua cried, with a shrill chuckle—"my days are numbered, are they? We shall see!" and whipping up his superannuated team, he drove away.

"Papa, you oughtn't to have said that," Josie protested, when the colonel returned to the veranda, where she had been a listener. "If Mr. Fisher—if anything should happen to him, suspicion would point to you!"

"Bah!" the colonel replied. "That old wretch will never die. He's too mean. You heard what he said?"

"Yes. Mr. Vaughn holds the mortgage!"

"Which is equally as bad as though Fisher held it. Indeed, I'd rather that Fisher had kept it than to have Gilbert Vaughn triumph over me. He has long wanted this place for that upstart son of his, and now bids fair to get it."

"It is too bad!" Josie moaned. "If there is any one person I dislike more than another, it is Guy Vaughn. And what do you think? The insolent fellow had the audacity to ask me to marry him!"

"Humph! as though my daughter would wed a Vaughn!" and the colonel shrugged his shoulders in supreme disgust. "When you arrive at an age to contemplate marriage, I have a husband already picked out for you."

"Indeed! have you? Why, I always supposed this was a free country, where a girl could choose her own husband! Who have you in view, may I inquire?"

"One whom I fancy you look upon with more favor than all the rest of your acquaintances—the son of the woman whom I once loved."

"Peter Perkins?" and a soft glow was visible upon Josie's either cheek.

"Yes. He is a boy of good principle, and I have no doubt but what he will make his mark in the world, and be a noble man."

"I like him very much," Josie admitted, "but I don't know whether I could ever desire him for a husband."

"Well, we will not discuss the matter now, pet, for we have matters of greater importance to think of."

And so they had, as succeeding events proved. There was trouble in store for the Joslyns.

CHAPTER XI.

ON CONDITION.

THAT evening, as Colonel Joslyn and Josie were seated in their parlor, each silent and occupied by painful thoughts, the door-bell rung, and Peter was ushered into their presence.

This was nothing unusual, for somehow, he found it convenient to call at Joslyn Hall every night on his way home, and have a few minutes' chat with Josie and the colonel, who ever received him warmly.

"Good-evening," the colonel said, rising to shake hands. "I am glad you have come, Peter, for, somehow, Josie and I had taken to moping, and you always have the effect to brighten up matters. Any news?"

"No—none to speak of. I have a letter for you, however. Perhaps it may be of some interest," and he tossed it to Mr. Joslyn as he took a seat upon the sofa beside Josie, seeing that she made room for him.

"Hum! hum! yes!" the colonel said, putting on his gold-rimmed glasses. "I don't seem to recognize the handwriting either. From W— too?"

"Yes, it was a drop-letter, but I did not see who deposited it in the letter-box," Pete replied.

The colonel tore away the envelope and unfolded the sheet of paper inclosed.

Then an exclamation of surprise broke from his lips.

"What is it?" Pete demanded, eagerly—"a clew?"

"Not exactly. Look for yourself. What do you think of it?"

The paper was of a fine quality, such as is only sold by first-class stationers.

It contained only the following words:

"Ha! ha! ha! ha! We will think about it!!!!!"

This was all, but it caused Pete to look up at the colonel inquiringly.

"From the party who stole your money?" he said, interrogatively.

"Very probably. You see what good the notice did!"

"Yes. It did just what I wanted it to do."

"I do not understand."

"Then I'll enlighten. It has brought me a discovery."

"Ah! how?"

"Why, the same hand that penned this queer communication wrote the warning I received from the masked man, over a week ago."

"The deuce you say!"

"Fact! I will compare them."

The two papers were spread out upon a stand in the lamp-light, and Peter pointed to them in triumph.

"See! the writing is the same!"

Colonel Joslyn and Josie gazed at the chirography earnestly.

The colonel, however, had grown strangely pale, a fact that did not escape Poor-house Pete's attention.

"What is the matter, sir? Have you ever seen that writing before—do you recognize it?"

"Yes, I have seen it!" was the brief reply.

"Best of all, do you recognize the handwriting, and know who has robbed you?"

"That would be hard to say, for a hundred men might write a similar hand. If the author of these messages is the man I suspect, I certainly do have reason to believe that I know who robbed me!"

"Who?"

Pete put the question so pointedly that the colonel gazed at him a moment as if in doubt whether he had better grant the information.

"I don't know that I ought to tell you!" he said, slowly—"still, I don't know any reason why I should not. I—"

"In plain words, that is my father's writing," Pete interrupted, more positively than interrogatively.

"Rather, it is like the chirography of him who wrote the lying letter to my affianced and afterward married and deserted her."

"I surmised as much. As for myself, I am of the belief that my father is in this vicinity and it is through his instrumentality that I have been placed in the position I have, and provided for so liberally."

"Most likely you are right. God forbid, however, that you should ever be induced to look upon him as a parent, who so cruelly and villainously deserted your poor mother!"

"My mother was the dearest friend I ever had, and, I might say, the only parent," Peter said, deliberately. "If my father is the outlaw and villain he is pictured, I can never be a son to him. If he falls into the clutches of the law, with the law he must deal, even though he be my parent."

"Nobly spoken, my boy, nobly spoken! If Paul Perkins is here, and it is from him you are receiving aid, you may rest assured it is not without a purpose."

"So I believe. This letter you received, to-night, I consider a clew. If I am not greatly mistaken, I will eventually run down the man who robbed you. The chirography is somewhat peculiar, and I look to the post-office as the means of putting me on the trail of my man. Maybe I am no detective, but I shall freeze to this case, until something turns out!"

They were still busied in conversation, when the door-bell rung, and the servant directly appeared.

"The Messrs. Vaughn wish to see Colonel Joslyn and daughter!" was the stiff announcement. Joslyn's face assumed a strange expression as he turned to the boy.

"I suppose you won't care, particularly, to meet them, he said."

"No!" Pete replied. "I will go."

"By no means. I want you to overhear what is said. Take a seat in the back parlor there, and leave the door ajar. I will make the interview as brief as possible."

Peter obeyed; then the colonel ordered the servant to show the Vaughns in.

In a few minutes they were seated in the presence of the colonel and his daughter.

Guy Vaughn's eye was well, and both he and his father were scrupulously attired.

"I hear you have met with a sad loss?" the banker said, opening the conversation. "I have been out of town nearly all day, and only recently heard of the burglary."

"Yes, I have been robbed," Joslyn replied, coolly. "I suppose you came to talk about the mortgage?"

"Well, no—that is, not exactly. Let me see,

however; if my memory serves me right, it comes due to-morrow?"

"It does."

"Yes! yes! Why, you see I have so much to attend to I had nearly forgotten the exact date of its maturity."

"A rather improbable assertion for you to make," the colonel replied, coolly. "Men of your profession are not apt to allow an obligation to become overdue."

"You are mistaken, sir—greatly mistaken. I frequently have matters run over for weeks without having time to attend to them. Because I hold the mortgage against your place, it does not signify that you need feel hard toward me."

"We will not discuss personal feelings at this interview," the colonel said, haughtily. "If I do not recover the stolen money before to-morrow night, we will be prepared to vacate Joslyn Hall as soon as we are given legal notice to do so."

"Oh! now, my dear Joslyn, there is no need of your speaking so hastily—no need whatever, I assure you. I did not come here to gloat over your misfortune, as you seem to infer, but rather to sympathize with you, and see if we couldn't manage to patch matters up to our mutual satisfaction. I am aware that so far as the local liquor interests have been concerned, we have been on the outs, but affairs are practically so near a crisis in this respect, that it is but a matter of a few weeks when you will be forced to yield to our superior strength, as you are no doubt aware."

"Never!" the colonel declared, sternly. "Although financially poor, I shall still work faithfully for the cause I represent, and you will find you cannot overthrow us, do what you will."

"Time will best prove that, and we are only wasting breath in discussing the matter."

"Very true. If, therefore, you will make known the object of your call, we can quicker come to an understanding!" said the colonel, still unyieldingly.

"Well, I can accommodate you without much trouble. As you well know, I have long had a desire to secure this property for my son, Guy, but you have refused to sell it at any price, and thereby frustrated my hopes. Recently, however, I had an opportunity to obtain possession of the ten thousand dollar mortgage and took advantage of it. Not that I had any idea but what you would be perfectly able to meet it; I simply had it in mind to make you a present of the mortgage, on conditions."

"Indeed!"

"Exactly. As it has turned out, I suppose you will be unable to meet the payment to-morrow."

"Very likely."

"And it would but naturally remain for me to foreclose the mortgage, in order to protect myself. At sheriff's sale the property will not realize more than one-third of its real value, if it does that."

"Probably not."

"What would revert to you after my claim is satisfied, would be but a trifle. From a life of luxury and a high social station, you must take a long step downward. Gods! Joslyn, I'd sooner blow my brains out than suffer the humiliation and disgrace, if I were you."

"Poverty is no disgrace," the colonel replied, with a calmness that surprised even himself. Then he added, with cutting sarcasm:

"It has been said, I believe, that Gilbert Vaughn laid the foundation of his fortune by starting in life as a blind beggar's solicitor, in the city of New York. The beggar died in extreme poverty, while you were ascending the hill of prosperity."

"That report was a lie!" the banker cried, his cheeks flushing. "My people were always wealthy. Anyhow, it matters not. You are now, literally a beggar, and I, like a good Samaritan, have come to give you a chance."

"A chance?"

"Exactly. A chance to retain your position, socially and otherwise."

"I do not understand you."

"Then, I will be plainer. The families of Vaughn and Joslyn are two of the first in the town. The time-tried sentiment, 'In union there is strength,' would hold true in our case. You have a daughter, I, a son. My son desires your daughter as his wife. Promise me that our children shall marry, and I will cancel the mortgage on Joslyn Hall, on receipt of one dollar!"

Colonel Joslyn arose, his face stern and haughty.

"Gilbert Vaughn!" he cried, "our interview is at an end. Rather than see my daughter wed your son, I would take her life with my own

hands. If your carriage awaits outside, seek it!"

"But, sir, allow Miss Joslyn to speak for herself!" Guy Vaughn cried, rising.

"I will speak!" Josie cried, quickly. "I would no sooner think of marrying you, Guy Vaughn, than I would of cutting my own hand off!"

The banker had also arisen.

"You shall suffer the penalty of your folly—both of you!" he hoarsely declared, brandishing his clinched fist in the air. "Come, Guy, we will go; but ere twenty-four hours pass, steps will be taken to make you master here, and they shall go into the street!"

"Hold!" Peter cried, springing into the parlor. "Look to yourself, Gilbert Vaughn, that you do not get into prison instead of putting others into the street. I know you, now. Do as you threaten, if you dare!"

"Curse you!" was all the banker could say, as he backed out of the parlor, followed by his son; but in that malediction there was so much that was malignant and rancorous that it caused the Joslyns and the boy to exchange significant glances.

And give a sigh of relief when they heard the Vaughn carriage roll away.

CHAPTER XII.

A DISCOVERY.

It was with some reluctance that Pete took up his duties at the post-office the next morning, for, in addition to the fact that he wanted to be out and about town and watch what proceedings were to be made against Colonel Joslyn, he did not feel well, having a dull headache, and a generally depressed feeling.

There was nothing left for him to do, however, but to attend to business, and as it turned out, it proved fortunate that he did not seek to obtain a leave of absence.

With the first morning mail there came two letters that particularly attracted his attention, as he was distributing the letters among the various boxes.

Both of these letters were inclosed in blue envelopes, and bore the post-mark of "Washington, D. C." They were both directed evidently by one person.

Upon the right hand upper part of one envelope were printed these words: "Internal Revenue Department," and below this was a notice to the effect that a fine of \$100 was fixed for using that envelope for other than official business. This letter was addressed to Oliver Osgood, Esq.

The other letter was for the same party, but was not an official envelope, judging by the fact that on it was no printed matter, or official form. "Oliver Osgood!" Pete mused, regarding the letters thoughtfully.

"It appears that there is some one in Washington who has correspondence with the Internal Revenue Department—a secret-service agent, maybe. Maybe I ain't the only person who has suspicions that there's crooked business transpiring in this town. I wonder if it won't pay me to be a little curious, and take a square look at Mr. Osgood, when he comes for his mail?"

He put the letters in the "O" box, at the general-delivery window, and managed to answer all applications that were made for mail matter, but during the forenoon no Oliver Osgood put in an appearance.

Something else occurred, however, that Pete considered quite as important.

The whistles had blown for noon, and he was alone in the office, when an old-fashioned carriage drove up, and a rough-looking man got out, and taking a box from under the seat, entered the post-office and deposited this box upon the express counter.

The box had been originally a soap-box, and was solidly nailed.

The man had the appearance of a rough farmer, but there was something about his looks that Pete did not fancy, as he advanced to wait upon him.

"I want this sent to New York," the man said, indicating the box. "What time will it go?"

"Not before eight o'clock this evening, sir."

"All right. Give me a receipt."

"Your name, sir?"

"Jack Bender."

Pete made out the receipt, wondering if he showed the surprise he felt.

The box was to be shipped to "Murphy and Co., Room H, No. — Nassau street, N. Y."

"Do you wish to prepay the charges?" Pete asked.

"Of course," and Bender threw down a crisp, new ten-dollar note.

Pete took it up, indifferently, and went to a money-drawer in the post-office department.

Here he examined the note, and tucked it into his pocket, and taking two bills and a handful of silver from another pocket, made the change, and returning, gave it to Bender, who at once left the post-office and drove off in his carriage.

"On the trail at last!" Pete muttered, gleefully. "That note is counterfeit, and there's a gang of counterfeiters in this town, as sure's my name is Peter Perkins."

For a little while he was so excited that he scarcely knew which way to turn. He believed he had captured a valuable clue when he least expected it.

He took the box from the counter and deposited it in the postal room. It was not heavy enough to contain much else than paper.

"I wonder what's in it?" Pete muttered. "Maybe it's a batch of counterfeit money. If I dared, I'd open it."

What struck him most peculiarly was that the box had been brought to him. His orders were to receive packages for shipment if any were presented, but then that was something which did not occur frequently, as the office for receiving and shipping unsealed and heavy packages was but a few blocks away.

He knew he would be violating his trust as an employe of the company to open or in any way tamper with the box, and yet he had an innate curiosity to know what it contained.

Shortly after noon a money express package arrived, addressed to Jackson Bender. It was marked to contain five hundred dollars; and when he received it, Pete at once made up his mind to one thing.

He would demand identification of Mr. Bender and thus get his general bearings, so that he could easily be found if wanted.

But the afternoon wore gradually away, and Bender did not reappear.

This caused Pete considerable perplexity.

It was his desire to know the contents of the box before it should go away on the night Express; but how to go about the matter he could not quite decide.

His mind was busy with the problem of how he was going to work it, when something occurred.

The something was the appearance at the general delivery window of a boy, who asked if there were any letters for Oliver Osgood.

"Yes. But I cannot give them to you. They are important, and the gentleman must come for them himself," Pete said.

The boy went away, but soon returned.

"The gentleman said as how it would be all right, an' you were to give 'em to me," he said.

"Where is the gentleman?" Pete demanded, as if still suspicious, although in reality he had no doubt but what the lad was telling the truth.

"At the 'otel, sir."

"Which hotel?"

"The Grand."

"What sort of a looking man is he?"

"A large man, sir, with a big corporosity. Got brown whiskers."

"How is he dressed?"

"Got on a speckled suit, sir, and white plug hat."

"All right. Here are the letters," Pete said, giving them to him, at which the boy departed. Pete then literally smiled all over his face.

"How are you, Mr. Oliver Osgood?" he muttered, triumphantly. "I like your name of Graham the best, however."

The postmaster usually left the post-office about four o'clock, after which Pete had full charge.

To-day he left an hour earlier than usual, and Pete was never more glad of anything in his life.

It gave him just the opportunity he wanted.

Seating himself at a table when there was a lull in business, he wrote the following and at once sent it to the Grand Hotel.

"MR. GRAHAM, alias OLIVER OSGOOD, Secret Service Detective:—

"DEAR SIR:—You will see by the above that I am aware what you are. Call on me at once. I have something to tell you of importance."

"PETER PERKINS."

Mr. Graham arrived within half an hour, and was admitted to the interior of the office.

"I was greatly surprised at your note," he said, as he took a seat. "What do you mean?"

"That I know you are here on the watch-out, in the interests of the Government," Pete replied. "You need not deny it, for I would not believe you."

"Well?"

"Well, believing you to be a detective, I pro-

pose to take you into my confidence, and expect you to take me into yours. I am doing a little turn at the detective myself, and if you and I were to consolidate, I believe we would make a success."

"Maybe so. I rather like your way, my boy, and you are shrewd enough to be a detective, that's sure. How did you form your conclusion about me?"

"From the letters."

"Well, what is it you have to confide?"

"First I want to know if we are partners."

"Here is my hand, boy."

The two shook hands.

Then Pete said:

"Before I go into explanation, I want to know what particular line of business brought you to W—?"

The detective was silent a moment—appeared to be deliberating as to what reply to make.

"I was sent here," he said, finally, "to investigate a suspicion that an illicit distillery was in operation in this township."

"As I supposed. Have you made any discoveries?"

"None."

"Are you qualified, as a detective, to make arrests for other criminal doings—for instance, such as counterfeiting?"

"I am. But why do you ask?"

And the detective's demeanor showed that his interest was increasing.

"Because it is my belief that there is a band of counterfeiters located in this town, who may or may not carry on their business in connection with the illicit distillers."

Pete then went on to explain as rapidly as possible.

It was a slow job at best, for he had to attend to his postal duties between words. But he began at the beginning and continued until Graham knew all he had found out, as well as his suspicions.

"This is valuable news to me," the detective said, "and we will work together and share alike. The box undoubtedly contains counterfeit money. I will soon see."

He seized a hatchet and pried off the top board of the box. Then removing several layers of tissue-paper, he bent over and examined the contents of the box.

"It is full of *this*!" he said, handing Peter a bill which was a duplicate of the one he had received from Bender. "There are a good many thousand dollars of bogus money in there."

"What are you going to do about it?" Peter demanded, as the detective replaced and re-nailed the lid.

"Oh, send it to New York, of course!" was the grim retort. "You have received the money for that package's transportation to New York, and the Express Company are responsible for its delivery. We want to secure the 'shovers,' to whom the goods are consigned."

"That's so. You will telegraph to the New York detectives, I suppose."

"By no means. My opinion of the New York force is not exalted, you know. They are but a lot of primary school-boys, where the Washington secret service boys are graduates."

"What do you think about the money sent to Bender?"

"It is plain enough to me. The gang here are manufacturers. The Metropolitan parties are 'disposers.' The manufacturers of the bogus sell it to the 'pushers' at so much per lump, good cash, and the 'pushers' take their own chance for profit. In all probability this 'plant' supplies different gangs of 'pushers' in various parts of the country. The money sent Bender likely to pay for a previous consignment of the 'queer.'"

"Do you propose to arrest Bender when he comes for the money-package?"

"No."

"You don't consider him one of the head ones of the gang?"

"Certainly not. He is but a stool-pigeon. Your plan is best. We must not alarm these birds until we are sure we have them. When Bender comes, demand proper identification. When he leaves here with the money the chances are large I'll know where he goes."

Shortly afterward Graham took his departure.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MASKED MAN.

SATISFIED now that he was pretty near, if not quite, a full-fledged detective, the boy felt greatly elated over his success thus far.

His shrewdness had certainly been the means

of the counterfeit money being discovered, and not only that, but it was not unlikely the whole gang would be discovered through his instrumentality.

The remainder of the afternoon passed without incident until it was near time to close the post-office, when Jack Bender put in an appearance.

"Is there a money package come here for me?" he demanded, gruffly.

"What's the name?" Peter inquired, turning to a large book.

"Jack Bender, o' course. Ye must be mighty poor o' memory when it wasn't only noon when I brought a box here to be sent."

"How much money is expected, sir and who from?"

"Dunno just what ther amount is but it comes from the same parties the box wer' d'rected to. So hurry up. I ain't no time to palaver."

"Sorry to detain you, sir," Pete said, mildly, although he was secretly exultant. "But, you see, you are personally unknown to me, and I shall require identification before I can deliver you the package of money. That is the order."

"Identification be darned. Didn't I leave that box here, an' didn't ye give me a receipt for it. You know me darned well."

"I received the package, and gave out a receipt for it in the name of Jackson Bender—that's all. I must have satisfactory proof that you are Bender. In other words, you must get somebody known to me to identify you. If you want the money to-night you'd better hurry up, too, for it is almost closing up time."

Bender looked mad enough to eat somebody, as he turned and shuffled out of the post-office.

He returned inside of ten minutes accompanied by Gilbert Vaughn, the banker.

"What's the matter here?" that personage demanded, blusteringly. "Why don't you give this man his money?"

"For the simple reason that I don't know him!" Pete replied, in a matter-of-fact way. "My orders are to demand identification where applicants for money are not personally known to me."

"Bosh! nonsense! I'll have you removed from this office. You're better fitted to drive a swill-cart."

"I'd do that, providing I could get your son to collect the slops for me!" Pete retorted, good-naturedly but sarcastically. "Do you identify this man as Jackson Bender, sir?"

"Of course I do!" was the fierce answer. "You are an impudent young rascal, and I'll make you sorry you ever set foot in this town."

"All right! Anything to make it interesting. Here's your money, Mr. Bender. Please sign your name here."

Bender inscribed his name in the receipt-book, and then he and the banker left the post-office, while Pete busied himself shutting up for the night.

When he quitted the post-office it was dark, and he set out at once for Fisher Farm, with the intention of stopping on his way at Joslyn Hall; but when he arrived at the Hall he found it dark and wearing a deserted appearance, and found a mortgage-sale notice posted upon the door.

The proud, but honorable colonel had vacated the premises.

After reading the notice, which announced that the sale would take place on the tenth, instant, which was four days later, Pete continued on his way to Fisher Farm.

Arriving at the farm-house he found Fisher and Samantha seated at the kitchen-table, busied in examining quite a litter of papers of various sizes and character, some of which were legal documents, while others looked like notes and receipts.

Upon the floor was a strong iron box, about three feet long by two wide, and two and a half high. The lid was secured, when closed, by a strong iron padlock at each end, in addition to the heavy mortise-locks of the center. From appearances, it would take a professional burglar hours to get into the heavy receptacle, which was made of wrought iron.

Both the farmer and his wife looked up rather unpleasantly as Pete entered, which he considered was a hint that his presence was not desired; so he passed on into his parlor.

Lighting a lamp he sat down and tried to read, but found that that was out of the question; his mind was too active.

"I wonder what they're overhauling the documents for?" he mused. "It looks as if the old man was preparing to die."

An hour rolled away, and he could hear them still at the table; so, as the chances of his getting any supper looked decidedly slim he

threw himself upon a couch and gave himself up to meditation.

Soon, however, he heard the outside kitchen door close, and then the sound of a third voice in the kitchen.

"A lawyer, I'll bet a copper!" Pete muttered. "The 'Crank' is going to make his will, maybe. I wonder if he will remember me?"

It was hardly probable.

He lay a few minutes with his eyes closed.

He kept them closed, too, when he heard the parlor door open and some one enter.

By the tread he knew it was Joshua Fisher, and so feigned to be sound asleep.

Fisher approached the couch and gazed down at him several minutes, then, apparently satisfied that he was asleep, turned and left the room.

Pete did not stir, however.

It occurred to him that he might be watched, as a test, and so he remained on the couch, with his eyes closed.

He was never more wide-awake, however.

The minutes dragged by, and the low hum of voices continued in the kitchen.

"The old man must be makin' a will as long as a chattel-mortgage," Pete mused, beginning to grow tired. "I wonder if I had not better get up and go to bed?"

He was seriously contemplating such an act when a slight noise attracted his attention and caused him to open his eyes enough so that he could see through his long lashes.

The room in which he was lying was provided with a large, old-fashioned fire-place, which was now covered up by a fire-board, papered like the room.

The noise heard by Pete came from in the direction of this fire-board, and at once arrested the boy's curiosity. Fortunately his face was partly turned in that direction, so he need not stir.

A lapse of several seconds occurred; then Pete saw the fire-place stir. Then there was another pause, after which he saw that the board was being gradually moved outward from the fire-place.

In another moment a sufficient aperture was made to enable a man to step softly out into the room.

He was roughly dressed, and a black mask entirely covered his face.

He gave Pete a searching glance, and then cautiously restored the fire-board to its proper place.

Pete had no difficulty in recognizing him as the same person who had thrust the warning into his hand over a week before. Consequently it was reasonable to believe that the intruder was the burglar who had stolen Colonel Joslyn's money.

Pete did not know what to do better than lie still and feign sleep.

He saw that the man grasped a cocked revolver, and doubted not, if he raised an alarm, he would get the contents of the weapon in his body for his pains.

The intruder glanced sharply about the room through the eye-holes of his mask, listened to the hum of voices in the kitchen, and then advanced noiselessly toward Pete.

On reaching his side he shook him roughly, at the same time presenting the revolver in full view.

"Sh! make no noise, at the peril of your life!" he hissed. "What are they doing in yonder?" nodding toward the kitchen.

"Examining a bit of paper," Pete replied, in a whisper.

"There is a third party there?"

"I judge so."

"Who?"

"I do not know."

"Who do you think?"

"A lawyer, maybe."

The masked man's teeth went together with a click.

"Then the old man's making his will?"

"I presume so."

"You lie there! Attempt to move a limb and I'll blow your brains out!" was the command, at which the man backed softly toward the kitchen door, his gaze never leaving Pete.

When he reached the door he stood and listened, intently, for upward of half an hour.

Then he again advanced to the couch.

"Turn your face to the wall, stick your fingers in your ears, and shut your eyes. Then count one hundred to yourself. If you disobey you won't live twenty-four hours!"

Pete obeyed.

When he was through with his count and looked around he was the only occupant of the room.

CHAPTER XIV.

STILL ANOTHER DISCOVERY.

As the reader may imagine, Pete was pretty thoroughly excited by this time—so much so, at any rate, that he could not think of going to bed.

The masked visitor had come from the fireplace, and that capacious hole must lead to some place—some secret apartment, either up-stairs or below.

Had the man departed the way he had come? Pete thought not.

He had listened, despite the fingers in his ears, and concluded that the man had not re-entered the fireplace, but made his exit by the front door.

Rising from the couch, Pete tried the door, and found it unbolted.

"He's departed that way, to guard against my having any suspicion that he gained entrance by any other mode," Pete muttered, softly, locking the door. "Heavens! can that be my own father who thus skulks around in the dead of night?"

The thought was not pleasant.

"I'm on to one point, at least. That chimney is the route to the place where the counterfeiting is done, or I miss my guess. But it won't do for me to make use of that discovery at present. It will keep. As Graham says, 'We must make sure that our game is our game before we bag it.'"

He spent some time in meditation, and at last, wearied with thinking so much, lay down on the couch and fell asleep.

When he awoke it was broad daylight.

It was Sunday, and knowing that his work at the post-office would occupy but a short while, he resolved to put in the day to good advantage.

After breakfast he went to the village, and after distributing the morning mail, he sought Mr. Graham at the hotel.

The detective was idly smoking a cigar, and welcomed Pete cordially.

"Well, what did you make out?" the postal-clerk asked.

"Nothing," was the reply. "Bender stayed about town until late in the evening, and then gave me the slip, and I could not get on track of him again."

"That's bad. But what you've dropped in the way of interesting news I've picked up."

And Peter related what had occurred the previous night.

"This is indeed a fortunate discovery," Graham declared. "The fireplace is the avenue, undoubtedly, through which we shall discover the counterfeiters' den. But it won't do to betray that we know it until we are sure a search will result in a full discovery and arrest."

"I have an idea," Pete announced, "and want to put it into execution. To-night the prospects are that it will be moonlight. How would you like to take a trip on the lake, back of Fisher Farm?"

"Why?"

"This much. I've an idea that an exploration of the shores of that lake and the dismal swamp might result in a discovery."

"Of an illicit still?"

"Yes, and a counterfeiters' den as well."

"How about a boat?"

"Colonel Joslyn has a fine rowboat. If I can get that, all right; if not, there's an old but safe scow on the edge of the lake, near the farmhouse."

"Very well. I'm in for anything you wish. You are captain, so I'll look to you for instructions."

"All right. Meet me on the lake-shore just as the moon comes up. Be well armed and have a couple of lanterns and some other lights. We'll spend the night in exploration, whether we make anything by it or not. And now, before I go, there's another thing I wish to ask you: How did you come to be appointed St. Clair's agent for providing me with clothing and so forth?"

Graham looked puzzled.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I demand to know. You are a Government agent. How did you come to serve St. Clair?"

"First tell me how you know him."

"Through meeting him once, and his informing me that you would represent him in the way of furnishing me clothing and so forth."

Graham looked reflective.

"I met St. Clair on the train when we were within twenty miles of W—," he said, finally, "and we drifted into conversation, gradually, as traveling men oftentimes will. When I mentioned W— as being my destination he questioned me closely. I represented myself as going

to start a dry-goods store here. After awhile he said that there was an orphan boy in W— in whom he took an interest, and he would like to secure an agent who would see that the boy was well-clothed, and that he should obtain a lucrative position. He said that it was his intention to stop in W— to secure a representative, but really had not the time to spare, and suggested that I become his agent, stating that the boy would be expecting me, and would be notified to whom to apply for assistance. He gave me your name and urged so hard that I finally consented, and he gave me two thousand dollars, good cash, to defray your immediate expenses, ordering me to give one thousand of it, as bonus, to secure you a good position."

"Did he go on past W—, in the cars?"

"Yes."

"What day was this?"

"The day before I first saw you in the magistrate's office."

"My first meeting with St. Clair was that very morning," Pete said.

He then went on and explained. He told of his first meeting with St. Clair, what he had learned of Colonel Joslyn, and, in fact, every thing that is already known to the reader.

The elder detective made a memoranda of what was related to him, in short-hand, and looked thoughtful when Pete had finished.

"It looks as though St. Clair was your father," he said.

"That is my belief!" the boy assented. "But, that does not matter; if he is an outlaw, and robbed Colonel Joslyn, he has no part of my pity or respect, and I shall work just the same for his arrest as though he were a stranger. Will you take him at sight?"

"No—that is, I don't think so, at present. If we go to rushing matters we may scare away the game. If we could snatch onto the man Bender, and frighten him into giving us a clear trail, for his liberty, it would be the easiest."

"That's so. Well, I'll hunt up the colonel, and meet you to-night."

And then Pete took his departure.

By making inquiries, he learned that the colonel and Josie were putting up at another hotel, to which he made his way, and was soon ushered into their presence.

They had a neat suite of apartments, including a parlor, and were very comfortably quartered.

To Pete's surprise, when he entered the parlor, he found himself not only in the presence of the colonel and Josie, but also of Mr. St. Clair, who was elegantly attired, and looking his blindest.

"I've been expecting you," the colonel said, rising and grasping the boy by the hand. "This is Mr. Devere, a New York detective, who has come to look up the robbery case. Devere, this is Master Perkins, the lad I was telling you about."

The two acknowledged the introduction simply by a nod of the head, and Pete became seated.

"So my royal dad is playing it fine!" was the thought that flashed through the boy's mind. "I must make this visit short, or I shall betray that we have met before."

Aloud he said:

"I saw Joslyn Hall was closed, and had a notice on it, and so I thought I'd hunt you up."

"Yes, we vacated as soon as the sheriff put up the bill of sale," the colonel answered, "although I do not consider myself in any way dispossessed, as I still hold the keys."

"Have you formed any new conclusions as to the robbery?" Peter asked.

"Well, no, I don't know that I have, more than that I am inclined to the belief that your father, Paul Perkins, did the job. I have related what is known to Mr. Devere, and he favors my views on the matter. He will begin an earnest search to-morrow, and do what he can to get at the truth of the affair."

Pete did not look at St. Clair; he did not dare to.

"Well, perhaps it is my parent," he said, "and I am sorry that such a disgrace should fall upon me. However, if it is my father who has done you the wrong, no one will be more faithful than I in the effort to capture him and hand him over to the law. As a son, I have no pity and respect for him if he is a villain, and his heartless desertion of my poor mother can only be avenged when he is brought to justice. But," with a laugh, "I'm making rather a tragic speech when I have no time. A word with you outside, colonel, and I must be going."

Excusing himself, Colonel Joslyn accompanied Peter down-stairs, where they conversed for some time, and the lad secured permission to

use the colonel's boat that night. He also related all about his discoveries and alliance with Graham.

"Yes, I am sure we shall unearth a counterfeiters' den, if not a still," he said, in conclusion, "and that ere long. And I believe my father to be the head man in the whole nefarious business. I shall not falter, however. If he is my father, the law has more of a claim upon him than I. And another thing I would warn you of: Don't get too thickly attached to that man you call Devere!"

"Why? Is he not Devere?"

"By no means! That is the man whom I believe to be my father!"

"Impossible! He was sent on to me from New York."

"You simply took his word for that?"

"Well, yes—that is—"

"He knew you were expecting detectives, and saw a chance to ring in a deal on you."

"But this seems incredible. What object can he have in view?"

"That I cannot say. You can bet he means no good, however. He is my father—I am almost certain of that—and is planning some new mischief. Maybe he is trying to ferret out whether or no any one is suspicious of the existence of the counterfeiters' den. Anyhow, don't you for an instant let on but what you believe him a *bona fide* detective, and, as such, intend to employ him. We don't want him to have a thought but what he is safe in the part he is playing."

"All right. If I can get away to-night I will accompany you on your trip across the lake."

"I should be glad to have you do so!" Pete said, and then departed.

CHAPTER XV.

MURDER.

CONTRARY to our young detective's expectations, that night was not as desirable for the purpose he had in view as he had prophesied.

The sky was mottled with flying clouds, so that the moon only peeped through occasionally, and a strong rain-wind was blowing from the south.

Just as soon as it was dark Pete went to Joslyn Hall, and, armed with a key with which the colonel had provided him, he secured the light two-seated skiff and carried it to the shore of the little lake.

It was a heavy load, but he managed to bear up under it, and reached the water's edge in safety, although considerably exhausted.

Colonel Joslyn soon put in an appearance, and half an hour later came Graham the detective.

"I was a little delayed," he explained, apologetically. "There were a number of people congregated at the farm-house as I came past, and so I stopped to ask what was the matter."

"What is the matter?" Pete asked, quickly.

"Why, a murder has been done," was the grim reply.

"A murder?" Pete echoed.

"A murder!" the colonel gasped.

"Yes. Samantha Fisher has been stabbed three times through the heart and is dead!" Graham announced.

"Joshua Fisher is also stabbed several times, but still lives, although unconscious. Suspicion is openly directed at Colonel Jack Joslyn. I believe you are the man, are you not?"

And he laid his hand upon the colonel's shoulder.

"I am Colonel Jack Joslyn, sir!" was the haughty reply. "Who are you?"

"A detective, as the lad here has doubtless told you, and I will arrest you, instead of giving the local officers a chance. But, mark me, sir, as sure as I arrest you, that sure will I clear you!"

"My God! I suspected of a crime like this—I, who have always been a peaceful citizen?"

"Sh! be brave! Do not lose your nerve. Both Pete and I are sure of your innocence, and if old Fisher can be revived it will only require his ante-mortem statement to set you clear. You were heard to use threatening language toward Fisher, and that's what leads people to suspect you. Come, now; we will make a roundabout circuit, and I will manage to arrest you in the village. It will look better than though you were found here. Pete, you return to the farm-house and be alive to everything."

"Where is Devere?" Pete asked of the colonel.

"Haven't seen him since this forenoon," was the reply.

Pete hastened rapidly away.

On arriving near the Fisher place he found the big gates open, and the farm-house sur-

rounded by neighbors. There were also several officers from W— present, who were guarding the doors and keeping away the crowd.

Pete had a key to the front door, and gained entrance to the house without trouble.

Here he found a shocking sight.

Joshua Fisher, white and unconscious, had been laid upon the very couch where Pete had lain that morning, and his wounds were being dressed by two local doctors.

A third physician, assisted by neighbors, had lain poor old Samantha upon the kitchen settee.

She was dead, and the floor of the kitchen, usually as white as wax, was now besmeared with blood.

Murder most foul had certainly been done.

The excitement was intense.

As near as could be told, the crime had been committed an hour before Pete's arrival.

Hank Honeybee had heard screams, and rushing to the house, had found the old man and woman weltering in their own life's blood, and the murderer gone.

Then he had alarmed the nearest neighbors, and they had spread the news to W—.

Pete paced to and fro, very nervous and excited. Such questions as were asked him he answered, but advanced no theories. In his own opinion, his father was the murderer, but he would not hint such a thing until he could consult with Graham.

"Do you think he will live?" he asked of one of the physicians who were attending Fisher.

"He will hardly recover," was the reply. "We shall try hard to keep him alive, and, if possible, get him to speak."

Graham returned after an hour's absence, and announced that Colonel Joslyn had been arrested and lodged in jail.

This news seemed to appease the curiosity of the crowd outside, for one by one, they departed—all except the immediate neighbors.

Graham and Peter had a consultation as soon as practicable.

"You think Paul Perkins is the man?" Pete said, interrogatively.

"Without a doubt. He must not be allowed to get out of the town at any hazard."

After some deliberation they took the police into their confidence, to a certain extent, and a strong watch was kept of the farm-house, and a boat patrol was vigilant upon the lake.

If Paul Perkins had not already escaped, there certainly was not much chance for him to escape.

When Pete and Graham were satisfied on this point, they held another consultation and compared notes.

"We must find this man Honeybee," Pete said, "and pump him. The chances are that we may be able to learn something from him—the whereabouts of Jack Bender, if nothing more."

"You are right."

After some searching, Honeybee was found, in the hay-barn, sleeping upon a bundle of buffalo-ropes.

He sat up and glared at the detectives, as Graham awoke him, but offered no fight when he perceived that the detective grasped a revolver.

"What d'ye want?" he growled.

"Nothing but a little information," Graham replied. "Sorry to disturb you from your placid slumber, but business is business. I am Oliver Osgood, a Government detective."

The farm hand looked sullen but not surprised.

"Well?" he demanded, "what of that?"

"A good deal. You discovered the crime?"

"Yes."

"Where were you at the time it was committed?"

"Here, layin' down."

"You heard yells?"

"Yes."

"And rushed to the house?"

"Yes."

"The murderer was gone?"

"Yes."

"Did you make any search for him?"

"No. I was too scart. I run fer the neighbors."

"Honeybee, we have come to you for information," Graham said, sternly. "Colonel Joslyn is not the right man, but the captain is."

Honeybee's face did not change expression, as the detectives had anticipated.

"I'm sure et ain't none o' my bizness," he returned, sullenly.

"It is," Graham went on. "When I tell you, that I know of the existence of the counterfeit den, and the illicit distillery, and that a general arrest is to be made, perhaps you can use your tongue more freely!"

"I dunno. What do you want?"

"I want to know all the particulars about these places, about the Fishers, and about the easiest way to reach the captain!"

Honeybee was plainly affected by this speech. He looked ill at ease.

"What then?" he demanded.

"This much. You make a clean, open breast of the whole matter and I'll guarantee you won't be molested."

"You swear to it?"

"I do."

"Waal, et ain't much I've got to tell you," Honeybee admitted, sitting up, and eying the detectives, warily. "I've bin workin' fer old man Fisher for a year, now, simply as a farm hand. From what I've picked up, I know thar is an illicit distillery an' a bogus money plant, but as I got big wages it wasn't none o' my bizness to give it away. I hadn't nothin' to do with it."

"Where is the distillery?"

"In the swamp."

"Ah! Where does the stuff come from, out of which the whisky is manufactured?"

"It's unloaded by night at the further side o' the swamp onto a flatboat and carried into the heart of the swamp."

"How many men are employed?"

"Two—Jack Bender an' Jim Bings."

"And, now, how about the counterfeit den?"

"Dunno nothin' 'bout that, 'cept it's somewhere's in under the house."

"Who is interested in the still?"

"Old man Fisher an' five or six others. It turns out lots o' likker, an' pays big, but has to be run careful."

"Is Fisher and Co. also interested in the counterfeiting?"

"No. The old man knows about it, tho', an' gits paid for allowin' it ter be carried on about his premises."

"Who is the captain?"

"I don't know 'cept that he's some relation ter the ole man."

"Indeed? Bender is also in with the counterfeiters?"

"Mebbe, tho' I don't know for sure."

"Who do you think committed the murder?"

"I don't know!"

"Yet you suspect?"

"Waal, ef it comes to that, I'd blame the captain!"

"Why?"

"'Cause I know the captain was at the house in the afternoon an' I heard some tall cussin' 'twixt him an' the ole man. Ye see, the ole man made his will last night, an' I s'pect it was about that."

"Ah! what lawyer was employed?"

"Kerns."

Graham had made short-hand memoranda of the farm-hand's testimony.

"Now, about this bogus den:—is there more than one way in and out of it?"

"Like enough. All thet I know, is, thet there is a hole in the bluff at the edge of the lake, which leads to the place. The hole are hid by the tall dense growth o' reeds and water willows."

"Any other information you can give us?"

"None. That's all I know."

"Very well. We'll leave you now, but shall return by and by. If we find you still here we shall have to arrest you on suspicion."

"All right. You'll find me here!" Honeybee said, significantly.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONCLUSION.

PETE and Graham then left the barn, and their first move was to order the police patrol in the boat to be doubly vigilant in their watch about the base of the bluff.

The night passed away, and our two detectives were glad when it came morning.

Joshua Fisher was still alive, and therefore as the physicians prophesied that he would not live the day out, the coroner decided not to hold an inquest over the remains of Samantha until her husband should die.

Despite their caution, the detective workings of Graham and Pete had got out to that extent that they were regarded as having possession of full particulars about the murder, and would eventually clear up the whole affair.

With daybreak, Graham and Pete went to W— and held a conference with the sheriff and chief of police, and secured their coöperation, should it be needed.

A visit was made to lawyer Kerns.

"I hear you made a will for Joshua Fisher?" Graham said, after introducing himself.

"I did, and also drew up another document,"

was the prompt reply. "Until the death of my client, however, I shall say nothing. If he ever arouses so as to speak he can tell all. If not, I shall give in my testimony at the inquest, so far as it goes."

"What do you think about the charge as it stands against Joslyn?"

"It is infamous. But understand one thing: You are a detective—I a lawyer. It is known only to you that Fisher made a will. So do not connect me with the case until the inquest. Then there may be some surprising developments."

"I anticipate you, I think," Graham said.

"Joslyn has a bitter enemy?"

"Perhaps."

"This enemy will attempt to swear Joslyn's life away?"

"Well?"

"You have that which will make this enemy out a perjurer?"

"You must excuse me—this is my busy day," Kerns said, evasively, as he took up his pen and turned to his writing.

And so the two detectives departed.

"All works well," Graham averred. "I don't see much else to do now but watch and wait."

Before returning to the farm-house they visited the jail and gave Colonel Joslyn comforting consolation and assurance that he would be freed. Pete also called upon Josie and cheered her up; for the blow caused by her father's arrest had fallen heavily upon her.

Then Pete and Graham returned to Fisher Farm.

The crowd in the vicinity of the grim old mansion had multiplied greatly, as compared with the previous night, but was very quiet and orderly, and appeared, most of all, to be awaiting the announcement of Joshua Fisher's death.

The old man had failed rapidly during the detectives' absence, and the physicians had given up all hope of his reviving sufficiently to make an *ante-mortem* statement.

The coroner had already impaneled a jury, and but waited the coming of death to hold an inquest, as his services were in demand in another part of the town.

About noon Joshua Fisher stirred uneasily, and the watchers gathered around him and listened.

Presently his lips parted and he uttered the words:

"My son!" in a faint voice.

Then his face became distorted, and the death-rattle sounded in his throat, and his spirit fled to its Giver.

Two hours afterward Coroner King began the inquest.

Among those present were the jury, the physicians, the sheriff, chief of police, some seven or eight neighbors, Detective Graham, the postal clerk, Pete, and Gilbert Vaughn and son.

The farm hand, Honeybee, had also been brought in at the last moment.

He simply testified to hearing screams, discovering the bodies, and giving the alarm.

The testimony of the neighbors, in regard to being notified, occupied the next half-hour.

Several gentlemen, at the instance of the elder Vaughn, were called in, and testified to having heard Colonel Joslyn threaten the deceased farmer.

The physicians next testified as to the direct cause of the deaths, which ensued from wounds inflicted by a dirk-knife.

When they were through, Gilbert Vaughn stepped forward.

"Before a verdict is rendered," he said, "I have a bit of testimony to give in. There is not a doubt in my mind but what Jack Joslyn committed the crime. Last evening, about the time the murder appears to have been done, myself and son were passing this house in our carriage. As we were passing, we saw Joslyn come out of the gate and hurry across lots toward W—. Knowing nothing of the murder, we thought little about the matter, as the cut across lots is much the nearest route to W—. My son will corroborate my testimony."

Guy Vaughn arose and stated the same, substantially, as his father had done.

As he sat down, the door opened and three men entered.

They were, respectively, Jack Bender, Jim Bings, and lawyer Kerns.

Bender stepped forward.

"Gentlemen!" he said, "I come here to surrender myself and companion to the law, and to make a statement. But, first, I charge you to arrest Gilbert Vaughn and son, not only for malicious perjury, but for being interested in an illicit distillery, which has been running at full blast, in this town."

At a motion from Graham, the Vaughns were quickly taken into custody.

Bender then went on:

"We do not surrender ourselves for being in any way mixed up in these murders, but for being employed by the illicit distillery company, and also for being employed by a notorious counterfeiter, whose hang-out is beneath your feet. We hope by giving ourselves up to get lighter sentences."

"Do you know anything about the murder?" the coroner demanded, sternly.

"We do. We have just come from the presence of the murderer. His name is Paul Fisher, and he is a son of the deceased. He ran away when a boy, and only returned two years ago. He has spent the most of his time in his den, below here, since. When we heard of the murder we went to the secret chamber, or sub-cellar, and found him covered with blood. He confessed having done the job. He said the old man had made a will leaving everything to this boy"—pointing to Pete—"who is Paul Fisher's son, and to Josephine Joslyn. When he learned the fact, it so enraged him that he stabbed the old man and woman to death!"

A cry of horror escaped the listeners.

"Where is this man now?" the coroner demanded.

"In the sub-cellar. He swears he will never be taken alive. He has enough powder there to blow up a city, and swears if an attempt is made to approach him within twenty-four hours, he will blow this place to atoms. He's a desperate cuss, and will do it. He took a big dose of laudanum while we were there, and that will fix him!"

Here the man drew a package of money from his pocket.

"This he directed me to return to Colonel Joslyn," Bender went on. "It was he who committed the burglary, but not of his own accord. He was paid to do it by Gilbert Vaughn, so that Vaughn could improve the opportunity to foreclose the mortgage. As for Vaughn's statement that he and his son saw Joslyn coming out of the grounds here is a bare-faced lie. I'll tell you why: Bings an' me had an idea Joslyn was going to lead a search for the still, an' so Bings shadowed the colonel's movements all day Sunday. The colonel left the town at about half an hour after the murder was done, and came cross-lots to the lake-shore, where he met Pete here. Bings dogged him, an' kin swear he didn't go within a hundred rods o' the road, or this house. He met Pete, and they talked till a man came up an' told of the murder."

"This fellow tells an undoubtedly correct story," Graham now stated, stepping forward. "I am, unknown to many of you, Oliver Osgood, Government detective. With the assistance of Master Perkins I have found out about this illicit whisky and counterfeiting business, and personally know that much of this fellow's statement to be true."

"And as for Paul Fisher being the murderer," interposed Lawyer Kerns, "I can give an affirmative opinion. On Saturday night I waited upon Joshua Fisher, and drew up a full and explicit will, encompassing every cent he owned in the world! In my presence he destroyed a will which had bequeathed all his property to his son. He stated to me that his son had always been a wild rascal, and that, as they had had a quarrel, only that day, he, the old man, stood in fear of his life, and wished to change his will before it was too late. He bequeathed half of his entire wealth to his grandson, Peter Perkins Fisher, and the other half to Josephine Joslyn, providing she marries Peter, within two years' time. If not, the entire fortune goes to the boy. Furthermore, I drew up a confession, which was duly signed, to the effect that a company, including himself, Gilbert Vaughn, and four other prominent citizens of W—, had been engaged in the illicit manufacture of whisky for two years past, and thus defrauding the Government out of the customary revenue and taxes. Also, that his son, Paul Fisher, and Gilbert and Guy Vaughn, had been engaged in the manufacture and disposal of spurious money, for two years past, in a sub-cellar beneath the Fisher Mansion;—that within a few months past, he, Joshua Fisher, had ceased to be connected with the liquor business, thereby incurring the enmity of his former partners, and had warned his son to remove his unlawful business from the premises, thereby incurring his enmity. And he closed by hoping he would be forgiven, and that the law-breakers would be driven from the town!"

Much more was said by the various persons present, but it is scarcely worth while to repeat it here.

A verdict was brought in that Joshua and Sa-

mantha Fisher came to their deaths from the effect of knife-wounds inflicted by their son, Paul Fisher, and the coroner paid Graham and Pete a complimentary tribute for their interest in the case.

As soon as the inquest was over, the farm-house was cleared of all but the sheriff and police, a few neighbors, who were to lay out the bodies, and Pete and Graham.

The chief of police and his men escorted Gilbert Vaughn and his son to the W— jail, and Bender and Bings were also taken into custody.

Colonel Joslyn was set at liberty, and warmly congratulated by the citizens.

At the farm-house a consultation was held as to the advisability of attempting to arrest Paul Fisher.

"It's our duty to try and secure him!" the sheriff said, "but if he is so desperate a fellow, there's no telling but what he might blow us all up."

"I'm of the opinion that he would," Graham declared. "He knows the jig's up with him, and he don't mean to hang."

"But if he took laudanum that will be likely to render him powerless?"

"Providing he took enough," was the reply. "He may have only taken that as a blind, in anticipation that Bender was going to squeal, and we, supposing him powerless, would venture to attack him. Then he would light the powder."

The detective's supposition quelled the sheriff's ardor for venturing into the counterfeiting chamber.

He had the reputation of being a bold and daring official, but it became evident at once that his good sense rebelled at the idea of being blown up by gunpowder.

In fact, there was no one who had pluck enough to remove the fire-board and explore the fire-place.

No one except Pete. He watched his chance when he was temporarily left alone in the parlor, and approaching the fire-place, listened intently.

Despite his oft-expressed resolution, he felt a sort of gnawing pity for his sinful parent.

Within the fire-place the deepest silence reigned, and finally, no longer able to contain his curiosity, Pete softly removed the fire-board.

As he did so, he perceived that a rope about the size of a clothes' line was fastened to the board on the inside; saw that a spiral staircase descended abruptly into the deepest gloom. The rope followed the staircase downward.

At this instant Graham and the sheriff sprang into the room.

"Great God, boy, what are you doing?" the former cried. "You'll have us blown to atoms!"

"Nix!" Pete replied. "I'm just investigatin' D'y'e see that?"

And he pointed to the rope.

"Yes! yes!"

"Well, that leads to the sub-cellar, I calculate. When I opened this board that rope rung a bell to warn my father!"

The two men turned white with apprehension.

Pete, however, simply laughed.

"Don't be scared!" he said. "We'd be in Kingdom Come before now if the man was able to send us there. The laudanum has done its work, and I'm going down."

"For Heaven's sake, wait!" Graham pleaded.

"Wait a few minutes, anyhow."

"All right!" and seizing the rope, Pete gave it a violent jerk.

Up from far below came the faint tinkle of a bell.

But no explosion followed.

"The boy is right," the sheriff said, finally. "I'm going down."

They procured lanterns, and with drawn revolvers, descended the spiral stairway which was surrounded by stone walls.

Down! down!—then, they finally came to the sub-cellar.

It was a large apartment.

Counterfeiting apparatus was scattered about everywhere.

Upon the hard bottom, in the vicinity of a little fire, lay Paul Fisher, swollen and distorted—the laudanum had done its work!

And not a foot from the fire enough powder was emptied to have blown the house above to pieces.

What need we add in conclusion?

Joshua Fisher, wife, and erring son, were buried side by side two days later in the W—

cemetery, and the funeral was one of the largest turnouts ever known in that town.

Subsequently, revenue officers, led by Oliver Osgood and Pete, raided both the counterfeiting cellar and the illicit distillery and destroyed the entire apparatus, Osgood receiving good pay and Pete a complimentary medal, as he had now no need of pecuniary remuneration.

The handsome fortune left him by Joshua Fisher was more than enough to see him comfortably through life.

The trial of the Vaughns, Bender and Bings, and the several members of the whisky ring came off in due time. Bender and Bings received comparatively light sentences and accepted them with good grace; but the Vaughns received sentences to long terms of imprisonment at hard labor, and it served them right.

Colonel Joslyn's money was restored to him, and when the sheriff's sale came off, he bought back Joslyn Hall.

From W—, Osgood went to New York, and succeeded in capturing a number of the rogues whose occupation it was to "shove" Paul Fisher's "queer."

The tragedies at Fisher Farm so set Pete against the place that he finally sold it and invested the proceeds in a paying enterprise.

Once Poor-House Pete, but now a handsome and much-sought-after young man, and a favorite in W—'s aristocratic social circles, he often looks back and wonders what would have been his course in life had he not been adopted by Joshua Fisher and got that terrible whipping.

Who can tell?

Two years passed and then, as the following newspaper clipping will show, he consummated the desire that Joshua Fisher had expressed in his last will and testament:

"MARRIED."

"FISHER—JOSLYN.—On the 12th inst., at the residence of the bride's father, Mr. Peter Fisher, to Miss Josephine Joslyn, both of W—."

There was a grand wedding; and we wish, as did the merry guests, that the newly-wedded couple's path through life may be smooth and swathed in sunshine.

THE END.

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